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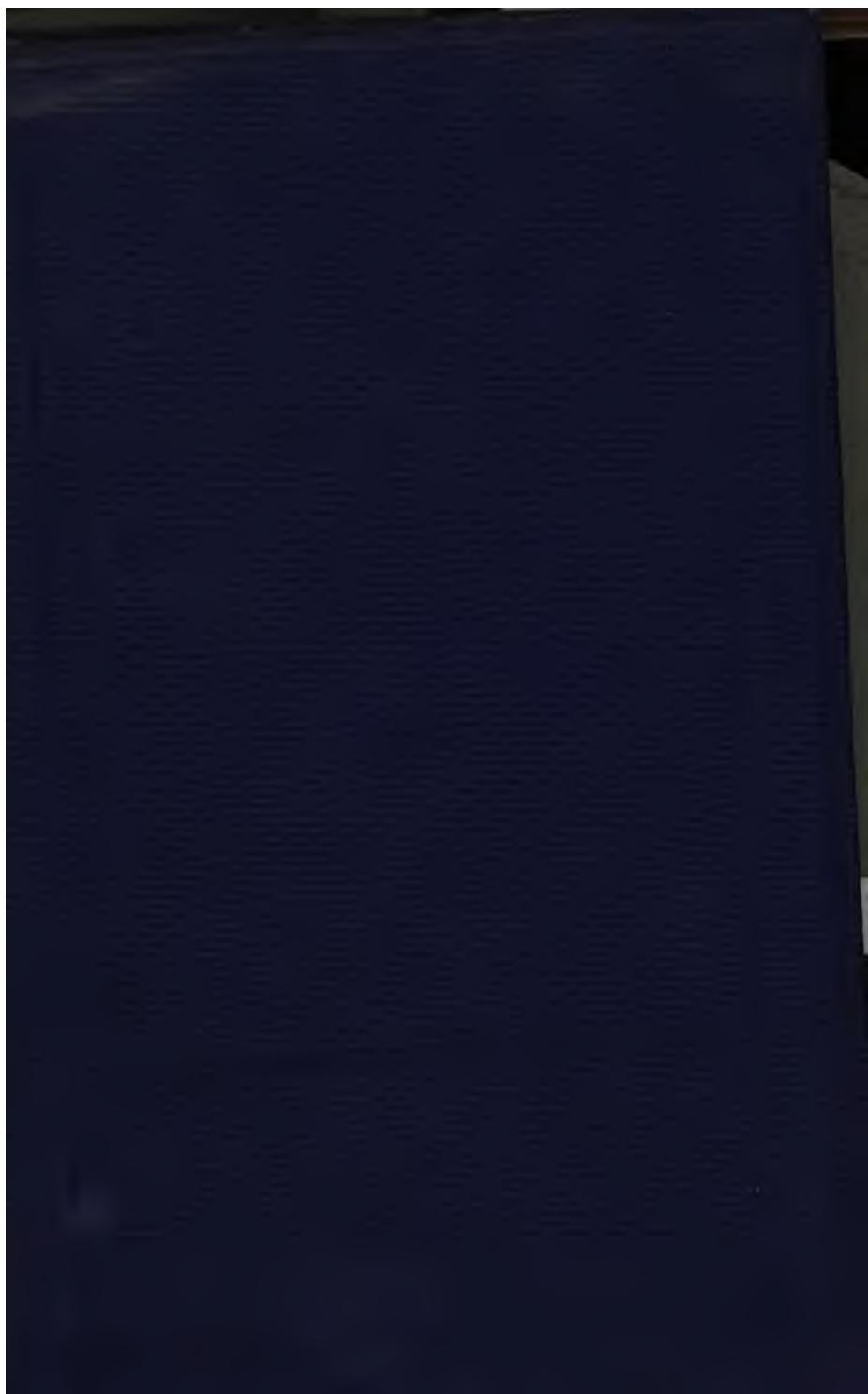
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HER WORLD AGAINST A LIE.

A Romance in Three Books.

BY

FLORENCE MARRYAT.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



London :

SAMUEL TINSLEY & CO.,
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1879.

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Inscribed in Friendship
TO
ELIZABETH GUPPY-VOLCKMAN
AND
WILLIAM VOLCKMAN.

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THE LIE.

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BOOK THE FIRST.

THE LIE.

“ O Lord ! my boy, my Arthur, my fair son !
My life, my joy, my food, my all the world !
My widow-comfort, and my sorrows' cure !”

SHAKESPEARE.



HER WORLD AGAINST A LIE.

BOOK THE FIRST.

‘THE LIE.’

CHAPTER I.

‘HAVE YOU GIVEN HIM REASON TO BE JEALOUS?’

MRS. HEPHZIBAH HORTON has just come in from a weary trudge through the mud and the grease of the city on a foggy November afternoon ; from standing in dingy offices until pert clerks shall have thought fit to deliver her messages to their masters ; from fighting her way into omnibuses over a *chevaux de frise* of damp umbrellas and dirty petticoats,

and she thinks she has earned the right to make herself comfortable.

‘Making herself comfortable,’ in Mrs. Hephzibah’s dictionary of terms, means stirring the fire into a blaze, lighting the gas, exchanging her muddy boots for a pair of easy slippers, and sitting down in the arm-chair with the newspaper in her hand, whilst the kettle boils upon the hob, and she waits the advent of the servant with the tea-things. And many people will be inclined to agree with her that there are worse companions to be found upon a foggy night than a warm room, a good light, and the day’s news.

Mrs. Hephzibah Horton is great at newspapers. If she had only twopence left for her dinner she would spend half of it upon a ‘daily;’ and devotes the greater part of Sunday, whilst properly-conducted people are confessing their sins, to making herself

thoroughly acquainted with the events of the past week. For Mrs. Hephzibah is a keen politician and a dangerous opponent with whom to argue, for she has a strong brain as well as strong opinions, and can handle the subject for which she fights with no unequal grasp.

Miss Hephzibah Horton is her legal denomination, for no man has yet persuaded her to enter into bondage to his will, but she stands out for the 'Mistress' before her name on the plea that no woman has a better right to bear it than she who has never been a slave. And since she has turned the corner of the forties, nobody dreams of disputing her right to do as she thinks best in the matter.

As she lies back in her armchair, conning diligently the account of some political meeting, it is easy to see from her face what an intelligent energetic mind she possesses. The keen, deep-set eyes glowing with per-

ceptive faculty; the mouth, with its long upper lip and large square teeth, indicative of promptness and decision; the somewhat heavy chin and nose, and the broad forehead, all tell the same tale, that here is the spirit of a man cased in a woman's body. Her dark hair, streaked with grey, is arranged with a view more to comfort than elegance, whilst her costume, plain, substantial, and somewhat quaint, is not calculated to lend any extra graces to her person.

The description is not inviting, but the woman does not entirely lack attraction. There is a power apparent both in her mind and her body that draws weaker folk to her for protection and advice, and a kindliness mixed with humour in her piercing grey eyes that betrays her sex, spite of herself.

At the present moment, however, Mrs. Hephzibah is thinking of nothing but politics, and, to judge from her closed mouth

and severe expression, things are not going entirely to her satisfaction. Twice has the servant entered the room, first with the teapot and then with the buttered toast, but her employer has not moved from her position. The debate which took place in the House last night is far too interesting. It has even made Mrs. Hephzibah forget that unpleasant interview she held with her solicitor, Mr. Bond, this afternoon, and at which he broke to her the unpalatable truth that there was not the remotest chance of her ever getting that twenty pounds owed her by Johnson. For herein lies the secret how Mrs. Hephzibah, who is one of a family of twelve, and has no private means of her own, can live where she pleases and how she pleases, without asking leave of any one.

She supports herself. She is proud to write down her name in the census (in which she would scorn to represent her age as one year

less than it really is) as a free-born, independent, self-supporting Briton. From a girl the desire of liberty and independence was strong upon her. She longed to make money as her brothers did, and be indebted for her provision to no one.

Perhaps it was the existence of this ambition, so antagonistic to the qualities which most endear her sex to men, that made the natural bread-winners pass her by in favour of women far less fitted to be their life-companions. For in the days that we first meet Mrs. Hephzibah Horton her sex had not pushed its way to the front as it has since done, and it was the exception for women to do any work at all, far less to make any marketable use of their labour.

Anyway, she was left to pursue her desire unmolested, and she has accomplished it. From little beginnings she has risen to solid, if not great ends; and now, at the age when

most women if not married have become soured through disappointment, Mrs. Hephzibah's days are employed in a continuous round of duty, which leaves her no time for discontent. She does not realise large sums for her work. She is not a fashionable novelist, able to command a thousand pounds for a thousand pages of bad grammar and worse taste : she is obliged to be as careful of her diction as of her subject, for she writes chiefly for the press, and there are too many competitors entered for that race not to render it necessary to keep one's eye fixed upon the winning-post.

But it is Mrs. Hephzibah's pride to know that, however limited her means, she can always command them, and that in a moment of emergency the thoughts of editors and publishers turn to no name so often as they do to hers. They know they can depend upon Hephzibah Horton, that what she

undertakes she will do, and that they will get no 'scamped' work nor illiterate criticisms from her pen. Many a 'slating' article that has made those that sit in high places writhe in their uneasy chairs, that has caused authors and politicians to swear, and occasionally even higher personages of the realm to feel uncomfortable, has issued from the couple of furnished rooms in the Strand which have served Mrs. Hephzibah as home for the last twenty years. And many a carefully-written and thought-out novel, but which bears no stamp of talent or originality upon its pages, has been returned upon its weeping owner's hands because she has pronounced it to be unmarketable.

So, slow and sure, like the tortoise in the fable, has won the race; and whilst many a brilliant story-teller, whose meteor-like popularity made the fagging press-writer feel very envious, has dropped behind, and is

‘nowhere,’ she still works on, never rising in her prices, but never falling, and always able to keep up the appearance and position of a gentlewoman.

There is a probability looming in the future indeed, which has the power to make even brave Mrs. Hephzibah’s cheek pale and her lip quiver : the ‘skeleton in the cupboard’ of all who live by their wits—the dread lest brain and hand should fail, and old age be cast upon the mercy of the world. But when the thought intrudes itself she shakes it off courageously.

‘Pooh, pooh!’ she thinks ; ‘so long as one has a head left on one’s shoulders, there must be *something* in the world that a woman can do. When all other trades fail, I’ll become a pew-opener, or a box-keeper, or a crossing-sweeper. I’m sure they sweep crossings up to the last day of their lives, because I’ve seen them. And after all, I’ve not so bad a

prospect before me as one of those wretched men with a wife and family to support, and only their own empty heads to look to for it. Thank Heaven! whatever ills may be in store for me, I shall bear them alone.'

By which it will be seen, that Mrs. Hephzibah is no great admirer of the other sex, nor of the holy estate of matrimony. But that is due, perhaps, to the great pride she feels in working for herself, and her love of independence.

Even to-day, although it is the evening on which to write her letter on home topics for the Australian papers, Dodson would insist upon Mrs. Horton taking back half-a-dozen books for review in his next issue.

'But I've no time to do it, Mr. Dodson,' she urged.

'Then you must find the time, Mrs. Horton,' was his reply.

It is flattering, but it is inconvenient.

There they lie, in dangerous contiguity with the buttered toast, some dozen handsome volumes in smart red and blue and purple covers, and Mrs. Hephzibah ought to put down that paper and go to work at once, if she intends to do business this evening.

But she will not even look at them. She is buried in her news.

‘A fine speech!’ she thinks as she finishes a long discourse on the injustice of taxing landowners who are ineligible for representation in Parliament. ‘I wonder what the Ministry will say to it! Ah! if the time had only come for them to give *us* a voice in such matters, I would move heaven and earth until I had seen some of these radical wrongs set right. But what’s the use of talking when the greatest wrong of which they are guilty—the position of our unfortunate sex—is right under their noses, and they will not even notice it. For eighteen cen-

turies they have cramped our minds as the Chinese have cramped their women's feet, and for the same reason—the fear that we should prove as strong a body as themselves,—and it will be a hard fight to get the swathing-bands off now. But I see it coming in the distance—the hour when we shall assert our right to stand side by side with the other half of creation, and be heard in our own cause. Heaven grant I may live to see it come!

A low tapping has been going on at the door during Mrs. Hephzibah's soliloquy; but it is not until she returns to the discussion of her paper that she notices it.

'Come in,' she calls out rather impatiently, adding, 'If it's the boy from the *Aurora* office, Sarah, just tell him that the copy is not ready, and it won't be ready till to-morrow morning, so it is of no use waiting. I'll send it by the first post.'

‘It’s not Sarah, Mrs. Horton ; it’s *me*,’ replies the low voice of somebody who has partially opened the sitting-room door.

‘It is *I*, you mean,’ corrects Mrs. Hephzibah ; but as she catches sight of the intruder all her sharpness vanishes. ‘God bless my soul, Delia Moray, you don’t mean to say it is you ! Whatever brings you round here on such a night as this ?’

‘I wanted to see you, to speak to you,’ says the stranger, in a hesitating manner ; ‘and I don’t mind the fog. Besides, it is in my way to the theatre.’

‘What time is it ?’ demands Mrs. Hephzibah, as she consults a large old-fashioned watch on the mantel-shelf. ‘Ah ! six o’clock. You’ve got a full hour to spare, haven’t you ?’

‘Yes ! a full hour,’ replies the other vaguely.

‘That’s right ! Now you must take off

your things and have some tea with me. It will warm you before your walk to the theatre. How cold your hands are! Come nearer to the fire! I've been dipping into the papers and forgot the tea; but it shall be ready in a minute. Why, my dear!—my dear!—what's this?

For Delia Moray has sunk on a footstool at Mrs. Hephzibah's feet, and laying her head upon her lap, commenced to sob bitterly.

'Oh! Mrs. Horton, I am so very *very* miserable!'

All the hardness fades out of the elder woman's face as she lays her hand upon her friend's head, and pats it soothingly.

'I'm sorry to hear it, Delia Moray, but I could have told you as much long ago. What else can you expect, when you put yourself in the power of a man? Don't you know that their tender mercies last just

as long as their admiration of you, and that a worn-out woman is much the same to them as a worn-out suit of clothes—only fit to be chucked away.'

'I was so young,' pleads Delia. 'I knew so little of the world. I never thought that it could come to this.'

'So every poor fool says, who has made a trial of them.'

'But I feel as if I couldn't stand it any longer. I wouldn't mind his cruelty to myself, Mrs. Horton! I could bear that—but it is the child!'

'What of the child? How can he harm him?'

'He uses him as a tool to extract my submission, and if I rebel in the least thing, he makes my poor Willy suffer for it. I can hardly describe to you the pass things have come to. He is hardly ever sober, night or day. I have worked (*you know,*

Mrs. Horton, how I have worked) to supply him and the child with the necessaries of life ; but he takes every farthing I earn for drink, and when I remonstrate with him and show him that Willy has not sufficient food or clothes, he insults and illuses me. Last night he threatened to turn me out of doors in my night-dress, and did lock me out upon the landing until the woman of the house came upstairs and said she would have the door forced if he didn't open it ; and to-day'—here the wife's tears choked her utterance, —'to-day, he has beaten my poor child till he is black and blue, and pushed me from the top of the stairs to the bottom. Look at my arm !' she exclaims suddenly, as she pushes up the sleeve of her thin alpaca dress, and shows the angry red and blue mark of a fresh bruise.

She is a pretty woman, of five-and-twenty, this Delia Moray, or she would be pretty if

she were not so thin and worn. Her Irish breeding is evinced by her blue orbs, black hair, and rose-leaf complexion ; but all trace of the national archness and *espièglerie* has deserted her countenance. Her sorrowful eyes are surrounded by dark rims—the effect of constant weeping—and there is a sad droop about her pretty quivering mouth. Yet the inherent fire of her race is only sleeping in her. It has nearly been extinguished by ill-usage, but the embers smoulder still, and only need a helping hand to fan them into a flame.

‘And that scoundrel can make a beast of himself upon your hard-earned wages, and then treat you like that,’ says Mrs. Hephzibah meditatively. ‘Now, be frank with me, and tell me the whole truth. Have you ever given him reason to be jealous of you?’

‘Never ! so help me Heaven !’

‘Look me in the face, Delia Moray, and say those words again.’

The girl, she is but a girl compared to Mrs. Hephzibah, raises her mournful eyes and regards her friend steadfastly.

‘*Never*, Mrs. Hephzibah, as God will judge me at the last day !’

‘I believe you. But come now, let’s forget all this for a few minutes and have our tea. When that is over, you can tell me as much more as you please.’

Mrs. Moray rises, and takes her seat at the table ; but her breast is still heaving with emotion, and she cannot do more than drink feverishly the cup of tea her friend presents to her. Mrs. Hephzibah is sympathetic, but she can still eat. And as she crunches her buttered toast, and watches poor Delia’s unsuccessful efforts, she thanks God she is not as other women are.

‘What made you marry this man ?’ she

demands abruptly, as the slight meal is concluded.

Delia Moray looks up with a startled, flushed face.

‘Didn’t you hear my question ? I don’t ask it without a purpose. I want to learn all you can tell me about your former life. Perhaps I may be able to help you.’

‘How can you help me ?’

‘Never you mind ! We’ll talk of that by-and-by. Tell me now about your marriage. Where did you meet Mr. Moray ?’

‘Miles away from here, at a little town in Scotland where I was playing.’

‘Was he on the stage as well ?’

‘Oh no ! He was a clerk in a bank, or some house of business in Glasgow ; but he got into trouble, and had to leave.’

‘He was kicked out, you mean ! Did he embezzle money ?’

‘I am afraid so ; but he never told me the

entire story, and I did not think it of much consequence then. I was only sixteen. James saw me first upon the stage at Greenock, and when he proposed to me, I thought it a grand thing to be married to him. I had no parents, nor relations, that I knew of, and his people were thought a great deal of in Glasgow. But I have never seen any of them, except his brother.'

'Was your marriage with him a secret one?'

'He kept it a secret from his family. They were very proud, he said, and he was afraid if they heard he had married an actress, they would refuse to help him any further. So we waited till we could cross the border, and were married in Berwick.'

'I'm sorry for that! If it had been done in Scotland, we might have proved it to be an irregular marriage. What is the name of the place at which you were married?'

‘Chilton. Oh! I shall never forget that day, Mrs. Hephzibah. There was such a fearful thunderstorm. I was frightened out of my senses; and the horrible old man who married us was so tipsy, he could hardly get through the service. And the very same night the little church in which we were married was burned to the ground.’

‘Burned to the ground, child! What! entirely destroyed?’

‘I believe so. They said it was struck by lightning, but some people thought the clergyman had set fire to it himself; and I am sure he was tipsy enough for anything.’

‘Delia Moray!’ exclaims Mrs. Hephzibah suddenly. ‘Have you got your marriage certificate?’

‘Yes! I have a copy of it. It was given us before we left the church. But why do you ask, Mrs. Horton?’ — with a dis-

tressed countenance—‘surely you do not suspect that I am *not* married to him?’

‘No, child! No! It would be much better, may be, if you were not. But the man is a villain, and may turn round upon you any day. Keep the certificate safe. Don’t let it go out of your own hands, or you may find your name ruined before you know where you are. *Burned to the ground!* I never heard of such a thing before! And what became of the drunken parson?’

‘I have heard nothing of him since. For a few months we lived near Glasgow, and then James was unfortunate, and lost his situation, and I had to go on the stage again, and have been there ever since.’

‘While he does nothing!’

‘No! nothing. He says he can’t get anything to do.’

‘An idle excuse, because he prefers to live upon your salary. But it appears to me that

things have come to a crisis, and that you ought to do something to free yourself from the clutches of this scoundrel. Your friends can't help you, because you've got none, and *his* friends won't. Nothing remains for you therefore, Delia Moray, but to take the law into your own hands and help yourself.'



CHAPTER II.

‘HE WILL DRINK HIMSELF TO DEATH BEFORE
LONG.’

At these words the younger woman's face became a picture of despair.

‘How *can* I help myself?’ she cried.

‘As other wives have done before you. Have you never heard of such a thing as a protection order?’

‘Never!’

‘Really, the ignorance of our sex upon matters of general information is astounding! I should have thought it was the

interest of every married woman in Christendom to make herself acquainted with the relief the law contains for her. It's little enough, my dear, I can tell you, and would burden no one's brains to get by heart. A protection order, obtained from a magistrate, would render you safe from the assaults of that man to-morrow, and enable you to live in peace, and support yourself and your child.'

'Oh! Mrs. Horton! can it really be true? I thought that a woman, once married, was bound to remain with her husband till his death. I thought he could force her to live with him.'

'So he can, if he supports her—not if she supports him. Thank goodness! we are not quite such slaves as that! though, in my opinion, marriage is a one-sided contract, under the best of circumstances.'

'But couldn't they *compel* me to support

Mr. Moray ?' says the wife, trembling at the prospect of deliverance. 'He has a bad cough, you know, and he says he's too ill to work. Who would keep him if we were to separate ?'

'Let him keep himself, the idle hound, or go on the parish !' exclaims Mrs. Hephzibah indignantly. 'He is not too ill to throw you downstairs and otherwise ill-use you, and no one can compel you to work for his bread. It's not your business to do it. The non-liability of the female sex is the only set-off it possesses against its woeful lack of independence. But I hope to live to see the day when full justice shall be done us—we don't ask for more than justice, mind you—when we shall have liberty to use the brains God gave us, in the way that shall best conduce to our own temporal welfare. By the way, why do you call yourself Delia "Merton" in the playbills ? Are you ashamed of the

other name? You have good cause to be !

‘ Oh, no ! but James is ashamed that I should be known to be his wife. He comes of a Scotch family, and they are very proud of the name of Moray. Most Scotch people are proud, I think.’

‘ You needn’t tell me, my dear. I know the national peculiarities. They preach more than any other nation upon earth, and practise less. A canting, psalm-singing, drunken lot ! Your husband seems to be a very good specimen of the race. He’s not ashamed to embezzle money, and drink like a fish, and ill-treat his wife, and live upon her earnings, but he is too proud to let his precious name be paraded in a playbill. A pretty sort of pride indeed ! And I shouldn’t be surprised to hear he says his prayers every night as bold as brass. Faugh ! It makes me sick ! And is “ Delia ” an assumed name also ?

‘No. That is my real name.’

‘Who ever gave you such a name as that ? Why didn’t they call you “Dahlia” at once ?’

‘I don’t know, I’m sure,’ replies the girl, with a faint laugh, some of her native humour roused by Mrs. Hephzibah’s quaint look of disgust. ‘Old Biddy, my nurse, used to call me “Miss Dalia” in the happy days before poor mother died and left me to look after myself.’

‘It’s nonsense to say “What’s in a name ?”’ continues Mrs. Hephzibah. ‘There’s *everything* in a name. Do you suppose I should ever have got on in the world as I have done, if I had had “Delia Merton” tacked to my back ? There’s weakness in every syllable of it. Now, I like my own name : as a rule, few people do ; but I am the exception—“Hephzibah Horton.” It sounds strong, doesn’t it ?’

‘It’s a very uncommon name,’ says Delia Moray.

‘I don’t care if it’s uncommon or not ! “Hephzibah” is a good old Scriptural name ; but that’s nothing to the purpose. I say it sounds *strong*. It’s the sort of name that if a man owed me money, and was told that Mrs. Hephzibah Horton was waiting to speak to him, would make him feel more inclined to jump out of the back window than to come downstairs and have the matter out. And though I don’t care about boasting, it’s a fact, my dear, that the thing has happened. Joseph Williams, of the *Aurora*, did it once, and sent me a cheque by the next post. But I’m certain he would have come down as bold as brass and palavered for an hour, if he had heard Miss Delia Merton wanted to see him.’

‘It’s nearly seven,’ says Delia Moray, rising ; ‘and I must go.’

‘Well, look here, child ! I am very glad you’ve told me all this ; and if I can help

you, I will. I must write my Australian letter to-night, and just run through those books for Dodson ; but I expect to see Bond—that's my solicitor—to-morrow, when I'll lay your case before him, and get his opinion. He's an awful old fool ; but I fancy he knows as much about his trade as most of them.'

'You won't mention any names,' urges her listener anxiously.

'*Won't mention any names!*' is the sarcastic rejoinder. 'No, of course not, if you don't wish it ; but that is the way with all you women ! You want Justice, but directly she approaches you, you tremble. Instead of saying outright, "Such and such are my complaints," you double and circumvent, and whisper in corners, as though you were the injurers instead of the injured. I tell you, Delia Moray, if women had but ventilated their wrongs from the commencement, instead of hiding them in their own breasts, they

would have been emancipated before now ! However, I suppose it is of little use talking. We have suffered in silence too long not to be afraid of our own voices. But I wish you well through it, my dear, and a speedy escape from him, one way or another. Should the worst come to the worst, I suppose he will drink himself to death before long ; and the sooner it happens, the better for you.'

'Don't say that!' responds Mrs. Moray, with a shudder. 'It seems so wicked, I dare not think of it!'

'Delia Moray ! you can't help being a fool, but you can help being a humbug. Don't talk nonsense to me ! Here is a brute of a man who makes your life a curse to you, and from whom you should pray each night to be delivered ; and when I speak of the natural ending to him, that, sooner or later, must come to us all, you cry out it's wicked ! What is there "wicked" in it ? Don't all

men die—the good as well as the bad? If you were in prison, you wouldn't think it wicked to pray to be set at liberty, would you? But this bondage you have brought upon yourself, you consider you are bound to suffer all your life long.'

'I thought he loved me once!' sobs poor Delia, with her face hidden on her friend's shoulder.

'There, go along! I have no patience with you!' exclaims Mrs. Hephzibah, as she pushes her towards the door. 'But mind you look in again to-morrow evening, and hear if I have been able to extract any sense out of that stupid old Bond.'

But long after Delia Moray, with her bruised body and sick heart, has crept away to her evening's occupation, Mrs. Hephzibah sits motionless, staring into the fire, and wondering what she can do to alleviate her position.

‘ A pretty kettle of fish ! ’ she ruminates. ‘ I guessed how miserable that poor girl was months ago. And now he’s taken to beating the boy too ! A wretched, half-starved looking little creature. And the brother stands by, I suppose, and sees it all, and doesn’t interfere. A nice lot ! I’d like to talk to them. But if I can get that unhappy girl out of their clutches, I will—— I don’t believe a word about the church being burnt down. It’s a trumped-up lie, invented by that coward Moray to serve his own purposes. He’ll live on the woman as long as it suits his convenience, and when an opportunity occurs for bettering his position, he’ll cut the rope that binds them, and send her adrift. Well, I must try and knock the whole business into Bond’s head to-morrow, and see what he says about it. He’s an old idiot, but he knows the law. But if I don’t

go to work at once, I shall have no time for play.'

And thereupon Mrs. Hephzibah subsides for the evening.



CHAPTER III.

WHO HAS TAKEN MY BOY AWAY ?

MEANWHILE Delia Moray, drawing her woollen wrap closely about her mouth to prevent the thick November fog finding its way down her throat, traverses the sloppy streets to the stage entrance of the Corinthian Theatre, where she has been employed, on and off, for the last three years. She fills upon the stage much the same position as Mrs. Hephzibah does in the literary world ; that is, though she will never come to the front and be applauded as a star of magnitude,

neither the manager nor the public could get on without her, and others of the same degree of capability. She can sing a little, just enough to give a ballad so as to please the gallery ; and she can dance a little, sufficiently to fill in the pauses whilst the greater luminaries are resting from their labours ; and she can speak her part well, and is thoroughly *au fait* at the business of the stage.

She will do everything, in fact, that the big stars disdain to do, and the very small lights are unable to accomplish. Were she a horse, you would call her a good hack ; as it is, however, she is only Miss Delia Merton ('Little Merton,' as the gods irreverently term her), who is willing to undertake any part that falls in her line, for a salary of two pounds a week. She has proved herself to be so painstaking and obliging, and looks, moreover, so ladylike when she steps upon

the stage, that the manager of the 'Corinthian' has been glad to keep her on from one season to another ; and in the intervals whilst the theatre has been closed for re-decoration, Delia has sung at concerts over the water ; has even been recognised, it is said, on the platform of a music-hall ; has done, and doubtless would have done, anything to procure food for the child who is her sole earthly possession, and for whom the idle, good-for-nothing husband and father refuses to work.

Inside the theatre little is known of the girl's private history, except that she is married. Of this fact she has never made concealment, using it as a protection in her dangerous position ; but since her husband never appears upon the scene, either to conduct her to the theatre or to take her home, she has not found his name of nearly so much use to her as her own. Most of the

women employed in the same line of business consider that Miss Merton 'gives herself airs.'

This is because, having so little to tell that is pleasant, she has assumed a degree of reticence that is not natural, and sits awkwardly upon her. She cannot chatter as the others do. She has no lovers to boast of, nor can she affect social superiority in the sense of being a married woman. Indeed, poor Delia strongly suspects that most of her companions altogether disbelieve the story of her marriage, and the suspicion makes her shy.

The part she has to play to-night—a secondary character in the opening farce—she has acted over and over again, until she is utterly sick of it. She dresses for it almost in silence, whilst the girls around her are relating all the adventures that have befallen them since the evening before, and

she is pondering on the conversation she held with Mrs. Hephzibah Horton. She walks on the stage and goes through her part almost mechanically ; words and gestures following each other in the old accustomed way, whilst the actress's heart is brooding over the probability—no ! not the probability, the *possibility*—of a release from her present intolerable bondage.

To live alone with Willy, somewhere—however poor and wretched it might be—where she could leave her boy when duty took her to the theatre, confident that he was safe and warm, and that no cruel, drunken father would come in and thrash him whilst she was away ; to be able to take her hardly-earned forty shillings home every Friday night and feel that, whatever she deprived herself of, her child would have sufficient to eat and drink for the following week—these advantages, the common justice

which her motherhood demands, but which she never dreamt before this evening it was possible she could claim—seem like the opening of paradise to her bewildered senses. No one notices the absorption of her mind; the audience see no difference in her acting, and the company only think that ‘little Merton is glummer than usual.’

And she is walking, and talking, and acting in a dream. The farce is succeeded by a melodrama, in which Delia has no part, but the evening’s entertainment finishes with a burlesque, for which she must wait.

She changes her dress quickly and descends to the green-room. She wants to get out of ear-shot of the folly going on in the ‘second ladies’ dressing-room, and to have leisure to think quietly over the marvellous revelation that has been made to her.

Can there really be a refuge provided for her wrongs? Delia Moray would hardly

have believed it from any other lips than those of Mrs. Horton. But she knows her to be as clever as she is true. Her acquaintance with her began in an unorthodox manner. It was during one of those seasons of drought about a year ago, when the 'Corinthian' was closed, and every other source of gain seemed closed also, that Delia Moray had entered a stationer's shop to ask if they knew of any copying (or other) work she could undertake to do.

Of course they did not. Stationers, with the rest of business men, are not in the habit of trusting their work to any one who may chance to demand it. But Hephzibah Horton was in the shop buying 'outsides' for her press orders, and was struck at first sight with Delia's face and manner.

She followed her into the street, and in her abrupt way asked who she was and where she came from.

A full explanation ensued. Delia could tell to a woman, and one who was evidently a gentlewoman, much that she could not say to the men with whom she desired to do business; and the end of it was, that Mrs. Hephzibah, with her usual energy, stalked off at once to Fleet Street, and there, having caught a dramatic critic, harried and worried the poor man to that degree, that he actually procured her *protégée* an engagement at one of the transpontine theatres before the week was out. And until the time to receive her salary arrived, Delia Moray's household was supported upon the proceeds of a five-pound note that was sent anonymously to her address the morning after.

Delia has never forgotten, nor ceased to be grateful for, that five-pound note. She knows full well from whom it came, though Mrs. Hephzibah denied all knowledge of the transaction in a manner that must have

caused the hair of the recording angel to stand on end.

But since that time Mrs. Horton has been the ideal of all that is most sensible and good in the actress's eyes. She would take her word against that of her own mother, did her mother still exist in this world. And if Mrs. Hephzibah thinks that it is possible the law may release her from her marriage bondage, it *must* be possible!

It is this idea that is making the poor girl's brain whirl. She feels as if she had no capability of thought, the idea which has been presented to her is so sudden and so strange, as she sits in a corner of the green-room with her face buried in her hands. Naturally, the apartment is not vacant. Members of the company come and go continually, as their names are given out by the call-boy; some, who have a long wait, like herself, ensconce themselves on the seats and

take to needle-work, or reading, or flirtation, as the humour seizes them ; but if it is flirtation it must be conducted very quietly and discreetly, for the manager of the 'Corinthian' possesses a powerful ally in the shape of a wife, who, having been more than talked about at one period of her life, is now so exceedingly virtuous, that, if she could prevent it, she would not let the members of her husband's company even look at one another. But since looks cannot be avoided, she keeps a rigorous watch over their tongues and actions, and is all over the theatre, here, there, and everywhere, when least expected, ready to note all misdemeanors with her sharp eyes and report them to the manager on the very next opportunity. Therefore the green-room of the 'Corinthian' is a pattern of propriety, and all conversations held therein are conducted in a whisper. Not but that Delia can catch the import of a communica-

tion passing between two women by her side, and the more easily that it relates to the subject uppermost in her mind.

‘ Who on earth do you think I met in the Strand to-day ? ’ says one.

‘ Can’t imagine,’ replies the other.

‘ Mrs. Ferrars ! wife of old Bob Ferrars of the “ Athenian.” ’

‘ Did you really ! Why she’s never living with that man again, is she ? ’

‘ Not she. She says she wouldn’t cross the road to speak to him if he lay dying in the gutter.’

‘ Who can wonder at it after the brutal way in which he treated her ? But what is she doing now ? Anything in London ? ’

‘ No ! She is just off for Liverpool. She’s got an engagement in New York ! ’

‘ Bless my soul ! you *do* surprise me ! I thought no power on earth would make her leave her children.’

‘No more it would! She takes both the babies with her.’

‘What does Bob say to that?’

‘Swears like a trooper I suppose, but he can’t help it. You know he squandered all her earnings and beat her so shamefully, she was obliged to apply for a protection-order against him.’

‘What’s that?’

‘La! my dear! I can’t explain it. Something the magistrate gave her to let her live by herself if she liked, and to prevent Bob pawning her wardrobe, and taking away her money. However he declared if she went away he’d keep the two children, and Mrs. Ferrars should never see them. He thought he’d got her there, you see. He doesn’t care a bit about the brats himself, but he knew she was so fond of them she wouldn’t be able to stay away from the place where they were. But she spoke to the magistrate, and he said

she might do as she chose, and Bob hadn't any power to touch the children, because they're so young; so she took them away from him the very same evening. And she tells me that when she has been in America for a few years, she will be able to get a divorce on the score of cruelty, and be free for good and all. And I'm sure I hope she may, poor thing, for she's had a bad time of it, and no mistake.'

Here the speakers turn the conversation, and leave Delia at liberty to think over what she has heard. So—other women can make an attempt to free themselves and their children from ill-treatment and tyranny, and why not she? Why cannot she apply to a magistrate, as Mrs. Ferrars did, for leave to take Willy away from his father and support him herself?

The story related by her companions inspires her with courage. It was much to

hear Mrs. Horton say there was hope for her in the law—still more to find her words verified in the case of a fellow-sufferer. Delia gets up when the curtain is about to rise for the burlesque, with alacrity, and goes through the part allotted her almost with pleasure. The absurd words and merry tunes seem to keep time to something ringing in her heart—when she dances, her blood appears to run faster as though she were trampling down the weary past.

It is hope she feels there : hope, the last good left for mankind at the bottom of Pandora's box—hope, to which poor Delia has been so long a stranger that she can scarcely recognise the feeling. She looks very pretty and *piquante* as she dances in the first row in her fancy sailor's dress—so much so that a lady in the boxes scanning the burlesquers through her opera-glass, points her out to the gentleman who is her companion.

‘ *Assez bien !* ’ is his rejoinder after he has taken a careful survey of the stage ; ‘ pretty, as you say, and pensive looking, but much too thin for beauty. These girls lead such fast lives, they go off terribly after their *première jeunesse*. ’

And the lady acquiesces, and looks at Delia again, and thinks what a pity it is that so elegant and attractive a woman should be classed amongst the lowest of the earth. Little does she imagine that the object of her pity is a wife and a mother—as virtuous as herself, and far more praiseworthy for being so. So hardly do we judge our fellow-creatures when we walk by sight only.

As soon as ever the curtain has dropped upon the burlesque, Delia hurries back to the dressing-room, and is robed in her old alpaca gown, dark waterproof and brown straw hat, before her chattering comrades

have disencumbered themselves of their glittering finery.

‘It’s raining cats and dogs outside,’ exclaims one of them as Delia Moray turns to leave the room. ‘How are you going to get home, Cleveland? Have a cab with Wilson and me, will you? The bus doesn’t set us down within a quarter of a mile of the door, and we shall get drenched to the skin if we attempt to walk.’

As she hears the proposal, Delia hurries away. She is dreadfully afraid some one will ask her to go shares in a cab next, and she cannot afford it. ‘Drenched to the skin!’—that is just what she must become before she reaches home, for she dare not even take a ‘bus.’ She has only a few shillings of her last week’s salary left, and she must not part with them for Willy’s sake. Seven shillings!—and this is Wednesday—who knows what necessity may arise for

them before she receives her salary again on Friday.

As the mother remembers this, and all that she has heard that evening, she twists her woollen comforter tightly round her throat and steps out into the pelting rain gallantly, her chief anxiety to get home to her boy, and provide as best she may for his comfort.

Willy is very delicate. As an infant he could not have proper care; she used to be obliged to leave him in the evenings, whilst she went to the theatre, to the tender mercies of her landladies, and his constitution has suffered from neglect. He is subject to attacks of croup and inflammation of the chest, and Delia trembles for his health with every change of the weather. To-night is a bad time for him—a cold November evening, combined with rain and a dense fog. She can even feel it penetrate her own

lungs, as she coughs and experiences that peculiar tightness in the throat that portends bronchitis. But she does not think of herself. All her care is for the child.

Her lodgings are situated a long way from the theatre, somewhere in the back streets of the city; but how can three people live decently on a couple of pounds a week?

It is half an hour, or more, before Delia Moray reaches the dingy old house in which she and her husband live, in company with half a dozen other families as poor as themselves.

The door is opened to her by her landlady, a battered old woman, who rejoices in a wig of dishevelled curls—a legacy probably, left her by some of her theatrical lodgers in exchange for rent—surmounted by a black cap adorned with every sort of dirty

artificial flower, but who keeps a kind heart in her bosom nevertheless, and is particularly interested in Delia, whom she constantly declares she will not see 'put upon.'

They exchange no greeting, for the mother is in a hurry to see her boy. She runs up one, two, three flights of stairs, and quickly enters a dingy sitting-room. There is a strong smell of beer and tobacco pervading the place; but it is empty, and the fire has burnt down in the grate.

Delia turns into the bedroom. All is in darkness! She makes her way up to the bed, and lays her cheek down upon the pillow. The bed is vacant—no one is there! Then a sudden fear attacks her. What has become of her child? She rushes out upon the landing, and calls to the woman who let her in at the front door:

‘ Mrs. Timson ! Mrs. Timson ! Where is Willy ? Who has taken my boy away ? Speak to me ! Tell me where he is gone to —for the love of Heaven !’



CHAPTER IV.

‘YOU HAVE MADE ME DESPERATE.’

THE woman in the brown curls and artificial flowers comes limping up the stairs.

‘Lor’ bless you, Mrs. Moray! you’ve no call to be in such a stew. I would have told you where he was at first, if you ’adn’t run past me like a whirlwind. The boy’s only gone out with his pa.’

‘With Mr. Moray, and at this time of night! Wherever can they have gone?’

‘That I can’t tell you. All I know is, that I was just going to slip off the child’s

things and put him to bed, when your 'usband called to me to put on his 'at and comforter, as he was going to take him along of him. I said it wasn't fit weather to take the boy out, with his cough too ; but all I got for my pains was to be told to mind my own business. The other gentleman was here too, and went out with them.'

'What ! Mr. William Moray ?'

'To be sure. They left about seven, and 'aven't been back since. When I 'eard your knock, I 'oped it was them ; for I knew you'd worry terrible to come home and find Willy gone.'

'Oh, Mrs. Timson ! it will kill him—in this dreadful weather !' sobs Delia.

'Don't go to talk such nonsense, ma'am. The boy won't take no 'arm, though he was coughing terrible, to be sure, as I let 'em out. The gentlemen seemed in high feather, though. Perhaps your 'usband 'ad some

good news—'eard of an appointment, maybe, or something of that sort—and it'll turn out all for the best ; so don't you take on like that now.'

'Oh ! what can he have heard that should make him take Willy out at seven o'clock at night ? He has never done it before ! He hates to take the child anywhere. And he is so delicate ; it's enough to kill him.'

'Well, I shouldn't wonder if it gave 'im an attack of croup,' replies Mrs. Timson, who, like most of her class, is a regular Job's comforter ; 'but still, there's no knowing. It's coming down worse than ever, I do believe. And 'ere you are, wet from 'ead to foot, and not taking the least 'eed to yourself.'

'Oh, never mind me ! I am of no consequence. I can think of nothing but my poor boy, exposed to this dreadful weather. Do

you think Mr. Moray will bring him home in a cab, Mrs. Timson ?

‘I don’t know, I’m sure. If it suits his convenience and don’t touch his pocket, he’ll do it, not else. And now you must take off those wet things. It’s all very well to say you can’t think of nothing but the child ; but what’s to become of ’im, I should like to know, if you fall sick and can’t work for ’im ?’

‘Yes, you are right,’ cries Delia, the landlady’s words recalling the new hope she has for the future. ‘I will change at once. It is so bad for Willy to come near damp clothes ; and everything depends upon my keeping well—*everything*.’

She strikes a light, and hurries into the bedroom, whilst Mrs. Timson goes down upon her knees to rekindle the fire.

‘Yes,’ she thinks as she does so, ‘you might fall sick, poor thing, and rot where

you lay, before 'e'd put out a finger to raise you up again. The idle, thankless varlet ! Before I'd toil my life out for such a man, he might go to the workhouse. But it's all for the child—the child ! She'd scoop out her two eyes if it would do the child any good, or lay down and die for 'im any day. And he's the son of his father too ! I wonder 'ow much thanks he'll give 'er for it by-and-by ?

Whilst Mrs. Timson is soliloquising, Delia is tearing off her articles of dress, one by one, fearful lest her boy should return before she is ready to attend to him. Three or four times does she rush out upon the landing, confident she hears voices and footsteps in the lower passage ; but it is only those of the other lodgers, or the wind and rain beating up against the hall door.

' Mrs. Timson,' she exclaims, whilst on one of these pilgrimages, ' make up a good fire.

Never mind the expense. My poor little boy will be so cold and' wet when he comes in. And put on the kettle of water. If his cough seems worse, I will give him a warm bath. Hush! Wasn't that the hall-door bell ?'

'Not a bit of it, my dear. The baker's boy broke the wire—bad luck to 'im!—this afternoon, and it won't sound. That's the first parlour ringing for 'is grog. 'E always takes a glass regular before turning in at twelve o'clock.'

'Twelve o'clock! Can it really be as late as that? Oh! what *has* become of my boy?'

'Now, you go and get somethink on your shoulders, Mrs. Moray, or you'll be catching your death of cold. What else could it be but twelve o'clock? You're never 'ome till half-past eleven yourself.'

But when Delia has discarded her wet

things, and sat down in the sitting-room to wait the advent of her husband and child, the suspense becomes still more intolerable. She walks up and down the little apartment in her restlessness, pressing her face against the dingy window-panes as though she could distinguish anything in the general darkness outside. She hangs over the creaking bannister-rail, listening, with painful eagerness, to every step that passes on the pavement in hopes of hearing one stop before the door.

More than once she gives vent to a violent fit of weeping, as the idea oppresses her mind that her husband has guessed of what she has been thinking, and has taken the initiative by kidnapping her boy, so she shall never see him again.

At one o'clock Mrs. Timson, with half-closed eyes, puts her head in at the door on her way up to bed, and requests

that her lodger will be sure to turn off the gas in the hall after the gentlemen has come in.

‘Oh! will he ever come back, Mrs. Timson—will he ever come back? Surely something dreadful must have happened to them! Mr. Moray is taken ill, or Willy has been run over by a cab! What else should keep them so late? I am frightened out of my life, waiting for them in this horrible suspense!’

‘Nonsense, my dear!’ returns the landlady practically. ‘You know your good gentleman’s ’abits well enough. It’s much more likely he’s been a bit overtaken by liquor, and can’t find his way ’ome. But, bless my soul, ’ere they are!’

And here, sure enough, they must be—or, at all events, somebody must be—for the knocker on the hall-door commences to sound, and continues to sound, as vigorously

as it can, until every lodger in the house is wakened from his slumbers.

Delia flies downstairs to open the door, whilst Mrs. Timson limps after her, growling audibly at the unnecessary commotion made by the returning party.

‘As if it wasn’t enough to keep honest folk out of their beds till the small hours of the morning, but what ’e must come ’ome with row enough for the Prince of Wales ’isself.’

But Mrs. Moray heeds nothing but the fact that her child is close at hand. She undoes the fastenings of the door with trembling eagerness, and flings it open. On the threshold stand three figures. She sees but one ; and sinking down upon her knees, clasps the fragile little boy in her arms.

‘Get out of the way, will you ?’ exclaims the stuttering, drunken voice of her husband. ‘What do you mean by blocking up

the door in this fashion ? Don't you see we want to come in ?

‘ Now, Mr. Moray, none of your shoving and pushing,’ interposes the landlady indignantly ; ‘ for I won't 'ave it, and so I tells you. Your poor wife's been 'alf out of her wits with fright and anxiety about you, which you ought to have been ashamed of yourself to take off the child in that fashion, without saying a word to no one, and keeping 'im out long after decent folks 'ave gone to bed ; but now you 'ave come 'ome, you'll please to keep a civil tongue in your 'ead, or I'll put you out upon the step again before you know where you are !’

‘ Hush ! hush !’ cries Delia imploringly, as she rises to her feet with the child in her arms.

‘ Hold your tongue, you old vixen——’ commenced James Moray, but his brother stops him.

‘Be quiet, Jem, and let us go upstairs. You’re not in a fit state to speak to any one.’

‘No, that ’e’s not, nor ever is,’ replies Mrs. Timson witheringly; ‘take ’im up with you, do, sir, and a precious bargain you’ve got. And if you don’t mean to stay here all night yourself you’ll be good enough to turn out again sharp, for I’ve waited up too long for you already, and don’t mean to trust my ’ouse to a drunken sot like that ’ere.’

James Moray here makes a futile dash at the landlady’s cap, but nearly upsets his balance in the attempt, and his brother with some difficulty guides his tottering feet up to the comfortless sitting-room, where Delia has already preceded them with the boy.

When at last they reach it they find her kneeling before the fire, taking off Willy’s wet garments and chafing his feet and hands, which are as cold as ice. The look

of anxiety and reproach upon her face is quite sufficient to raise her husband's choler.

'Leave that brat alone,' he says authoritatively, 'and let him put himself to bed as best he may. I require your services.'

But Delia can be angry too. The meek spirit with which she bears his insults to herself does not extend to his behaviour to her child.

'I *cannot* leave him yet,' she answers determinately. 'He is wet through to the skin, and God only knows what harm you may not have done him by taking him out at night in such weather. If I do not see that he is thoroughly warmed and dried he will have an attack of inflammation before the morning.'

'Do you mean to disobey me?' cries James Moray, as he advances towards her threateningly.

He is a slight effeminate specimen of his

race, with pale blue eyes and reddish hair ; but even an effeminate man is an alarming antagonist for a woman when he approaches her intoxicated and with uplifted arm.

A sudden resolution seizes Delia to appeal to the protection of her brother-in-law. She has never been intimate with William Moray, for though he constantly visits their apartments, it is generally during the evening when she is away from home, and when he has met her there he has taken his cue from James, and treated her more as if she had been his brother's mistress than his wife.

Delia dislikes him heartily, with his burly, well-fed manner and pompous speech, but surely, she thinks, he can never stand smiling by and listen to her husband's abuse of her.

‘Mr. Moray, I beg you to interfere with your brother on my behalf. This child is exceedingly delicate and most subject to

violent attacks of cold that endanger his life. He ought never to have been taken out to-night ; no father who had the least consideration for his health would have done so, but since the error has been committed I will not be deprived of applying the remedy. Pray reason with James and show him that I am right.'

'Well—really——' stammers her brother-in-law, 'I scarcely feel justified in—in—opposing—your—that is, my brother's—claim to do what he thinks best with his own child!'

'Of course not!' interposes her husband loudly. 'One would imagine, to hear you speak, that the boy didn't belong to me. Drop those clothes, I say! drop them! Leave the brat to himself and attend to us; and when that is done the pair of you may go together to bed—or to the devil, for aught I care!'

'I shall not leave him,' replies Delia, also raising her voice as she resumes her occupation.

The men are equally amazed.

'What !' exclaims Mr. William Moray.

'Were you speaking to me ?' demands the other.

'I spoke to both of you,' she answers, rising and folding her arms closely round the child as though to protect him. *'It is I that work for this child. All the money that comes to this house comes through my labour, and I do it for Willy's sake—no one else's. Therefore I refuse to give up the right to attend to his wants—the common right that every mother has.'*

'I'll be whipped if you shall attend to him now,' says James Moray, as he seizes the child by the arm and twists him out of her embrace.

The action is violent, and makes the boy

scream, and the sound of his voice in pain maddens his mother.

‘Mr. Moray!’ she exclaims vehemently, ‘if you stand by and let your brother treat us in this way I will never forgive you. You don’t know the tyranny he exercises over me and my poor child. Only yesterday he beat Willy cruelly—look at his back and judge for yourself—and threw me from the top of the stairs to the bottom——’

‘Really, my dear lady, these little domestic differences can have no interest for a third party. They are so much better kept to one’s self.’

‘*Little domestic differences!*’ she echoes scornfully. ‘Would your wife call it a “little domestic difference” if her arm was bruised as mine is?’

‘I should much prefer Mrs. Moray’s name being kept out of the conversation altogether!’

‘Oh yes! I suppose her name is too good in your estimation to be mixed up with such a disgraceful affair as a tipsy man beating his wife. But my name is Mrs. Moray too—and I have not only to hear of it, but to bear it.’

‘I think, James,’ says William Moray, turning to his brother, ‘it would be as well if I wished you good-night.’

‘All right,’ replies James, in a half-stupefied manner.

He is still leaning up against the wall, with the partially undressed and weeping boy in his grasp.

And William Moray, the well-fed, respectable city man, who can visit and encourage his dissipated brother in his vices, but never ask him to his own home or stretch out a helping hand to aid him to a better life, prepares to return to his vulgar thriving home at Brixton.

But Delia will not let him pass. She places herself before the door and glares at him like a tigress.

‘You shall not go until you have heard me speak,’ she says. ‘You come here and encourage this man in his drinking and his idleness; you know that he lives upon my earnings and ill-treats me in return; you know that you are ashamed to ask him to your own house or introduce him to your friends, and yet when I—a woman—appeal to you for protection and help against him, you smile and turn the subject, and say you’d better take your leave. Well then, I defy you both—*there!* Keep your drunken brother, since you are so fond of his company; support him yourself, for I am sick of it. My money is my own—not his—and I refuse any longer to keep him in idleness and vice, whilst I toil and slave. Go home and tell that to your wife, or I may take it into

my head some day to tell her myself. Between you both you have made me desperate !'

She looks so as she stands there, with the fire of indignation gleaming from her eyes. It is Mrs. Hephzibah Horton that is doing it all; other nights Delia has lost her temper, but she has never dared to threaten before. The resolution of her voice strikes the two men dumb, and as she ceases no sound is heard except the wailing of the child.

'Most extraordinary—never heard of such a thing !' mutters William Moray as he slips past her down the stairs.

Then she is left alone with her husband, and fear succeeds to desperation. Her vehemence has almost sobered him. He looks as though he were about to speak.

Delia makes a sudden dash at her child.

'Give me Willy !' she exclaims. 'I have said my say, and you have heard it. Let

me put him to bed, or I may become dangerous !'

To her intense surprise he lets her take the boy without remonstrance : lets her finish the task of undressing him before the fire ; then carry him, fondly clasped in her arms, into the bedroom, where he sleeps in a cot beside his parents. Willy—relieved of his temporary alarm—prattles to his mother during her task of the fine places he has been to and the pretty ladies he has seen during the evening, but though she hears him she is too weary to listen or to respond, for her heart is heavy as lead for dread of what may be before them both. Her husband's silence is ominous—of what ? Has he been impressed by her out-spoken reproaches, or is he in a worse condition than she at first supposed, and unable to comprehend what has passed ? Delia cannot tell.

She puts her boy into his little bed with many a fervent kiss, and returns to the sitting-room, inwardly trembling though outwardly calm, to collect his scattered clothes. Poor little Willy has but one suit. If she does not hang it before the fire to dry he will have nothing to wear upon the morrow.

As she enters she sees that her husband has quitted his former standing position and taken a chair. But when she has crossed to the fireplace and stooped to gather the little garments he rises suddenly, and turning the key in the door, secures it in his own pocket.

Delia glances round suddenly and meets his eyes. The semi-intoxicated look has faded from them : her daring has dispelled it. She knows now that she has to encounter a man sober enough to be dangerous, and sufficiently strengthened by liquor to feel his power. Her first impulse is to secure the

weapon nearest at hand, and that is a chair. She puts it in front of her and grasps it tightly, as James Moray, with his effeminate puny face and evil eye, advances towards her.

This is a nice way for a husband and wife, who have been separated for hours, to greet each other !



CHAPTER V.

‘GIVE ME THE KEY!’

‘WELL!’ he commences insolently, ‘and so you have chosen to insult my best friend, have you? and in my very presence too!’

Whatever the woman may feel, she carries a brave front. Yet she cannot forget that she is locked up in a room at midnight with a man who is utterly unscrupulous, so long as there are no witnesses to his actions; and though she grinds her teeth together to prevent it, her lip *will* tremble as she answers him.

‘Your best friend, is he? For my part I should be ashamed to be able to call no better man “friend,” than one who pandered to my vices, and yet did not consider me good enough to associate with his family.’

‘And if there has been any coolness between my relations and myself, pray who has been the cause of it, except you?—or my cursed folly in marrying a woman from the scum of the earth!’

‘It is not true. I was very poor when you met me—an unfortunate child cast on her own efforts for a living, and barely getting it at fifteen shillings a week. But you know that my connections are as good as your own, and that through all my struggles to live, I kept an honest character! And that is more than you can say for yourself.’

‘Born of poor but honest parents,’ he sneers; ‘yes! I think I have heard something of the sort before, and those who

pleaded it were usually the very opposite to their assertion of the parental attributes.'

'Do you mean to say, then, that you doubt my former respectability?' she exclaims indignantly.

'I didn't say so,' he returns in a tone calculated still further to affront her, 'but I have only your word to the contrary. And the truth of the asseverations of ladies of your class have not, I must confess, as a rule, inspired me with that complete confidence in the circumstances which, perhaps, I ought to feel.'

'God forgive you!' says Delia bitterly, 'for you know you're lying to me. Although I believe, from your brother's behaviour, that you have been cowardly enough to let him suppose it is the truth.'

'O! now you are becoming abusive, are you? Not content with putting yourself in a rage for nothing, and flying at my brother

like a fury till you drove him from the door, you must needs have a turn at me. But once for all, madam, I won't stand it !'

'You must stand it ! I will not keep my wrongs to myself any longer. I would work for you, Heaven knows, willingly enough, if you would only give me a little gratitude in return ; but I will not be knocked about and half starved, whilst you go swaggering out with William Moray every evening to spend the wages, for which I have to toil through all weathers, at the public-house or the music-hall. And your brother ought to be ashamed of himself to encourage you in it.'

'O ! he ought—ought he ?'

'Everybody says the same. Your behaviour to me is the talk of the house. I can't help that so much because, unfortunately, I have bound myself to you, and there seems no way of escape ; but I am not your brother's wife, and if he wishes to

spend his evenings in your company, let him pay for the pleasure, for I shall do so no more. Our poor child has neither sufficient clothing nor food, and yet you, who refuse to do a stroke of work to maintain him, spend the money which should be his upon your own vices. Is there a night, hardly, that you are sober? Are you sober now? It is enough to sicken any woman.'

'I am quite sober enough to hear what you're saying, madam, and to pay you out for it afterwards. If you choose to tell my brother that I thrash that whining biat of yours, and throw you downstairs (which I don't believe I ever did), why, I may as well have the satisfaction of doing it as the credit.'

'Do you mean to deny you used violence to me yesterday? Look at the marks of it on my arm! I was ashamed to undress before the other girls to-night for fear

they should ask me where I got these bruises.'

'We are getting mighty delicate all of a sudden,' he says, with the old sneer.

'Well, no woman, whether she cares for her husband or not, would like to confess to others that the man who has promised to love—and—and—and—to protect her, can beat her as cruelly as if she were a dog,' replies Delia, with a mighty sob. 'It's so humiliating——'

'O James,' she continues, with sudden energy, clasping her hands, '*can't* we try to live a little more happily together? You used to like me once. When you married me you said you had never cared for any woman so much as you did for me. And I've tried to be a good wife to you. I've worked hard, haven't I? and given you every halfpenny I earned, and you've never had reason to complain of my conduct to

any other man. Don't you think if we tried, we might live more at peace with one another? *Do* try, James—*do* try—to love me and Willy more. You could make us so happy if you chose; and you can't think how hard it is for a woman to live and work, day after day, without one word of encouragement or thanks.'

She is crying bitterly now, with her face hidden in her hands, but her tears have no more effect upon James Moray than they have upon the table. Let a man once permit the habit of drinking to get the better of his reason, and he may say good-bye to all the softer feelings of charity and pity and generosity. His honour deserts him, and with honour goes everything that tends to make a man. His wife's emotion excites nothing but ridicule in Moray's breast. The appeal she has made to him cannot touch his heart, for he has deadened its sensibility by

liquor. The sight of her weeping makes him giggle and sneer, and when he perceives that his amusement only causes her to sob more convulsively, he becomes angry.

‘I won’t have this snivelling,’ he says coarsely; ‘stop it! do you hear? It’s all put on. An actress can pretend anything she chooses. Whether I struck you or not, you had no right to tell William of it. What concern is it of his? And you’ve spoilt, maybe, the best day’s business I ever did in my life, by blabbing of me in that way!’

All this time it has never occurred to Delia to ask why her husband and his brother took the unusual trouble to drag out her delicate child, in such inclement weather, to accompany them upon their round of pleasure. She does not think of it even now. Subsequent events make it clearer to her, but at present her mind is filled with

but one idea, that either things must alter or she must leave them behind her. And she catches at the last words of her husband's address eagerly. They seem to contain a glimmer of hope for her.

‘How? by what means? has your brother offered to help you to get any work?’

‘Work! work! I’m sick of the word; you never seem to have an idea beyond it. I’d have you know that *my* family were not brought up to labour, whatever yours were.’

‘The more shame for them, if they leave their wives and children to starve. But Mr. Moray works. He could help you if he chose. You have told me that he married a rich woman, and has a beautiful house in Brixton. Why doesn’t he give you employment under himself, or make you an allowance out of his abundance?’

‘*Why?* Because—if you must know—he is ashamed that his wife’s friends should be

brought into contact with you. It isn't every one who cares to meet a second-rate actress, remember !'

'Then why does he come here to meet me himself?' she demands angrily.

'He comes to see me—not you !'

'And I may slave on for ever to keep you in drunken idleness, whilst he stands and looks on and sneers at my parentage and my profession. But he shall not have the opportunity to do so much longer.'

'What do you mean by that insinuation ?'

'I refuse to say. You will find out in time for yourself.'

'By Jove! you *shall* tell me!' exclaims James Moray, striding across the apartment to her side, and grasping her by the wrist. 'Now, what was it ?'

But Delia clenches her teeth and is silent. He shakes her violently.

'Will you speak or not ?'

‘ I will *not* speak !’

‘ I shall strike you in another moment.’

‘ If you do, James, as there’s a heaven above us, it shall be for the last time.’

She utters the words so forcibly, that for a moment he desists.

‘ Will you explain what you meant by William not having the opportunity of sneering at you much longer ?’

‘ I will not.’

‘ Then take the consequence of your cursed obstinacy.’

The uplifted hand comes down heavily upon the side of her head, but she does not resent it, further than by closing her eyes as it descends. But when she receives it, she draws a long breath, and, springing up from her seat, confronts her husband.

‘ What do you think of that ?’ he says jeeringly.

‘ I think, as I have always thought, that

you are a coward and a bully. I think—what I was fool enough to deny to-day, when it was suggested to me—that the best thing you can do is to drink yourself to death, and that the sooner it happens the better for all connected with you.’

‘O!—that’s the sort of suggestion your friends are in the habit of making, is it? I don’t believe you. I believe the idea originated with your own evil heart, and that you are quite capable of attempting to carry it out. But I’ll be even with you, madam. If my life is worth nothing to you, I know some one whose life is——’

At this moment, as if in response to, or confirmation of, the father’s words, there comes a cough—a single hollow cough from the next room. Delia hears it, and starts at once into an attitude of suspense. Her husband may rail as much as he likes at her now—she will neither heed nor listen to his

abuse. All her senses are enlisted on the side of the sound that issued from the bedroom. How well she knows it! That terrible single cough, with the brazen ring, that portends the approach of croup.

When it is repeated, and she is certain there is no mistake, she utters an exclamation of alarm, and makes a spring for the door. But it is locked, and the key is still in Moray's pocket. She turns towards him without hesitation. Their interview is over. There can be no further reason for keeping her from the child.

‘Unlock the door, James! I must go to Willy——’

His reply is given in a tone of perfect coolness, although a look in his eyes betrays that he knows his power.

‘I prefer your remaining here!’

‘But I cannot remain. He has got the croup. Don't you hear his cough. I must

apply the proper remedies at once. There is no time to lose.'

'I am afraid, though, you will have to wait my convenience.'

'Your *convenience*! when the child may be dying. Give me the key, I say. I *will* go!'

'You shall not go.'

She sees now that she is in his power, and recognises the object of his refusal. He will be revenged upon her even at the cost of Willy's health—perhaps his life. At this thought she grows furious as a tigress robbed of her whelps.

'I will *not* be detained in this room at your pleasure whilst my boy wants me. I will kick at the door till every creature in the house is roused. I will scream out of the window till every one knows how brutally you are treating me.'

'Will you?' he answers, advancing towards her steadily, with his eyes fixed upon hers.

She is about to retreat before him, when, with a sudden action, he seizes her hands, and twists them behind her back. As he does it, all the colour fades from her face.

‘Don’t make me reckless!’ she gasps. ‘Don’t irritate and excite me any further, James, for the love of God, or you may make me commit murder——’

‘I’m not afraid,’ he says nonchalantly, as he ties her hands behind her back with a piece of whipcord, and the croupy cough rings out again from the other room, accompanied by a hollow cry of ‘Mother!’

The sound utterly subdues her, and she takes to entreaty. Surely, when he knows how important it is that the boy should have immediate help, he cannot have the heart to refuse her.

‘James! I will be good—I will do anything you ask me, only untie my hands and let me go to Willy. I am sorry I spoke so

rudely to you just now, but you aggravated me, and you know I have a vile temper. Do let me go to the child. If these attacks are not attended to at once, they may prove fatal. For God's sake let me go !

‘ I shall do no such thing.’

‘ Are you not content with the ill-treatment you have given us already,’ she exclaims, ‘ but you must let the child die for want of assistance ?’

‘ I have no intention of letting him die—I can attend to him myself——’

‘ But you don't know how. You have had no experience. And where am I to be ?’

‘ You will remain here. No reasonable person can possibly blame me for refusing to lie down and sleep in the presence of a woman who has just threatened to take my life.’

‘ Ah, James ! for pity's sake, forgive me ! You know I didn't mean it. I wouldn't hurt

a hair of your head. Pray let me come too. I will not go to bed. I will sit up—I will lie down on the floor—I will do anything you tell me, if you will let me go to my boy.’

But her pleading is in vain. James Moray sees that he has her ‘on the hip,’ and has no intention of giving up his revenge. He doesn’t believe that Willy is in danger of death, but he knows that she does, and the knowledge is his triumph. So he advances deliberately to the door, and places the key in the lock.

She comes up behind him as close as she can.

‘James—*dear* James, do let me come too.’


His answer is to throw her violently from him into the centre of the room. Her tied hands prevent her being able to save herself in the slightest degree, and she falls, first against the table and then on the floor striking the back of her head and hurting

herself considerably. As she rises, confused and dizzy, she hears the key turned again on the opposite side of the door, and finds herself a prisoner. She rushes forward and kicks with her feet against the panels.

‘ James !—James !—James !—for the love of God, come back and take me to my boy!’

But all the answer she receives is conveyed by the sound of the slamming and locking of the bedroom door, and she feels that further appeals to his pity would be in vain. She sinks down on the floor, where she sobs as though her heart were broken.

In the cold and the dark, for her husband turned off the gas before he left her, she sits, rocking herself backwards and forwards, and moaning in the extremity of her anxiety and fear. What can Mr. Moray do to relieve the child, whose ominous cough still continues, at intervals, to strike her with alarm ? He has never attended on Willy at such



times before, is not acquainted with the proper remedies, does not even know where they are kept ! She hears him speak to his little son in a gruff voice as he enters the room, and bid him keep quiet and lie still—as if he *could* keep quiet with inflammation tearing at his throat and chest—yet not a sound reaches her to intimate that any medicine has been given to relieve his symptoms.

She hears Willy ask for her again and again, and the same order to him to be silent reiterated by his father, accompanied by a threat of punishment if he is not obedient.

The plaintive cry of ‘Mother ! I want mother !’ reaches her so distinctly as she remains with her ear pressed against the wall, and holding her breath in order to catch what may be going on upon the other side. She feels as if she must reply to it ;

but her husband's tones increase in irritability, and the boy, whose cough is becoming more violent with every paroxysm, is sobbing in his little bed.

The mother's suspense becomes agonising ; her brain seems almost to turn with the dreadful fear that oppresses her. She beats her body against the wall that divides them, and screams to her husband to administer the remedies for the child's relief. The effect of her vehemence is that Mr. Moray, in a loud voice, threatens to thrash the boy if he disturbs him again. At this, her heart stands still, although in the darkness her quivering face wears a sickly uncertain smile. For he cannot be in earnest—he cannot really mean to do such a cruel thing now, when the little lad is fighting for his breath. The feeble complaint is nevertheless repeated, and—God in heaven !—what sound is that ?

Yes — yes ! it is true ! The inhuman

monster is beating his sick—may be his dying child.

Delia's senses seem to forsake her. She beats, with her pinioned arms, against the wall, the door, the window, in her mad indignant horror, until, desperate at her impotence, and worn out with conflicting emotions, she sinks unconscious on the floor.



CHAPTER VI.

ROBBERY AND INJUSTICE.

THE next morning dawns upon a bright cold day. The dense fog has dispersed, and the rain ceased, and though a few hours of fine weather have not been sufficient to transform the wet and muddy crossings into dry land, they are navigable, and pedestrians look on them and give thanks.

Mrs. Hephzibah Horton rises with the lark, that is to say, she is seated at her breakfast-table as early as is compatible with a London milkman's ideas of serving his

customers in November, and certainly before the nine o'clock post comes in. Professional writers, as a rule, do their work either very early, or very late. For them there is no afternoon or evening, or rather these periods are their times for reaping that which they must garner in their homes.

Mrs. Hephzibah, when she has the option of choice, prefers to be early. Her business is chiefly connected with reviewing, or reforming that which others have written, and she likes to keep her evenings for thought, and her mornings for work. This morning, however, she intends to devote to the interests of her friend. For all Mrs. Hephzibah's savage energy when aroused, there is a well of sympathy in her independent breast for those less fortunately situated, and Delia Moray's case touches her upon a vital point. She looks upon her as a most valuable illustration of the necessity of the


cause she has at heart. She has taken a deep interest in her since the day she made her acquaintance in the stationer's shop ; and now that matters seem to have come to a crisis with the poor girl, Mrs. Hephzibah is determined to devote one morning at least to discovering what remedy there is for the evil.

Her boots, soles uppermost, lie side by side in the fender, ready for her to put on. Good sensible boots they are, one may be sure, with soles an inch thick, and uppers of solid leather.

‘None of your kid fooleries for me—with heels like spikes, stuck in the middle of a brown-paper sole,’ she is in the habit of telling her shoemaker ; ‘give me a boot that will stand twelve hours’ tramping in the mud, and let me set my foot flat on the ground as God intended it to be, the while, and I’ll thank you.’

And if the pair waiting in the fender for her feet this morning do not belie their looks, Mrs. Horton's shoemaker has earned her thanks.

When her breakfast is concluded and her boots are on, she proceeds to ensconce herself in a huge waterproof cloak that completely envelopes her and buckles round her waist with a belt that means buckling. A plain dark bonnet, without any veil, upon her head, and a stout umbrella, such as middle-aged gentlemen carry, in her hand, and Mrs. Hephzibah is equipped for warfare. Yet notwithstanding the absence of all such fripperies as lace and ribbon in her attire, she looks, from head to foot, a gentlewoman. Her clothes, though plain, are good, and her dress, though rough, is feminine. She will not wear a veil because she likes to see her way clearly before her, and she has discarded silk ties and ribbons about her throat because



they render her liable to cold ; and it is also strongly suspected by her friends that her gloves would follow her ties, were she not a little afraid of society and rheumatism.

Yet with all this contempt for pretty weaknesses, Mrs. Hephzibah has never adopted the masculine style of attire, which so many of her partisans affect. Whatever her private opinions may be, she stops short of outward folly—which is the reason that whilst many people think her principles ill-advised, no one has ever yet been found that did not respect herself.

And amongst the most ardent admirers of her freedom of thought and action is her legal adviser, Mr. Bond. This little man and Mrs. Horton are always quarrelling, and yet neither of them is happy without the other. Mrs. Hephzibah will not even undertake the correspondence of a new provincial paper without consulting ‘that little fool

Bond,' as she affectionately terms him; and although the solicitor cannot make any use of her clear understanding in his business, he has two motherless boys at home, just of an age to need a woman's supervision, and he never makes any alteration in his plans concerning them without first asking her advice upon the subject. So that when Mrs. Hephzibah on the morning in question, armed to the teeth with umbrella, boots, and waterproof, steps into the office in Holborn, and asks for Mr. Bond, the clerk in attendance, having first given her a dusty seat, flies to inform his principal that this well-known client seeks an interview.

'Well, my dear Mrs. Horton, this is an unexpected pleasure,' commences the solicitor, as she is ushered into his presence.

'Don't talk nonsense! Why shouldn't you expect me one day as well as another?

Any letter from Johnson's people by this morning's post, by the way ?

‘None ; I regret to say—none !’

‘Well, never mind. It's no good crying over spilt milk, and I have something of more importance to speak to you about. How stiflingly hot you've got this little office of yours ! What makes you keep such a large fire ?’

‘I thought—that is to say, the weather has changed so suddenly—there is such a frosty feeling in the air’—commences Mr. Bond apologetically.

‘Fiddlesticks !’ cries Mrs. Hephzibah. ‘If it's cold outside, all the more reason you shouldn't stew yourself up in an oven like this all day, and then turn out in the night air to go to Hampstead. It's no wonder you're as grey as a badger. But it's just like men. Present comfort is all you think of.’

‘It is well known that Mrs. Horton entertains no very exalted ideas of the sex,’ remarks Mr. Bond, smiling ruefully as he runs his hand over his thick grey hair.

‘Well, isn’t it true? Look at my head,’ says Mrs. Hephzibah, as she unceremoniously removes her bonnet and displays it for his advantage—‘hardly a white hair in it, and I suppose I’m as old as you are. What age may you be?’

This question is always an embarrassing one for either a gentleman or lady still “on their promotion,” or on the look-out to provide themselves with a partner for the second time, and the little solicitor grows quite confused on being so suddenly assaulted.

‘Why, you don’t mean to say you mind telling it!’ exclaims Mrs. Hephzibah contemptuously; ‘then I’ll set you the example—I was forty-seven last birthday, and that

was on the twentieth of September. Now you have it !

‘I have the advantage of you then by three years,’ rejoins Mr. Bond, smiling, ‘for I was fifty in August.’

‘Bless me ! Just what I thought. And you look sixty if you look a day.’

If Mr. Bond looks anything at this outspoken assertion, he looks particularly annoyed.

‘Ah ! it’s no use reddening up after that fashion. What does it signify how old you look ? When people come to our age, a few years more or less can’t make any difference. We’re past the time of courtship and that sort of nonsense, eh ! Mr. Bond ? But it’s all owing to your late hours and hot rooms. If you had been in the habit of walking in all weathers, as I do, and going into a cold bath every morning from January to December, and taking your natural rest and

eating plain food, you'd look as young as I do. But perhaps it's just as well you don't. Bob and Bill will be strapping fellows in another year or two, and if you looked less of a fogey than you do, some designing woman might be tempted to try and catch you for the second time. And you'd be made a fool of: you know you would! Not that there's much need for us to *make* fools of men, the Lord knows, when the majority of them are sent into the world ready made.'

'Really, my dear madam,' interposes Mr. Bond, who is not quite easy under the tone the conversation has taken, 'this is *not* business.'

'Whoever said it was? However, as it doesn't seem to be pleasure either, I'll tell you what I've come for. I want your advice for a young friend of mine, a poor fool who's married, and wants naturally to get unmarried again.'

Now, if there is anything on which Mr. Bond would rather *not* give Mrs. Horton advice, it is that connected with his own profession. This may appear strange, particularly as she pays him honestly for all she obtains, but it is the truth. He likes her excessively as a friend—and dislikes her as much as a client. For in the first place, though she asks his opinion, she very seldom adopts it; and in the second, they rarely enter upon business matters without having words together. Mr. Bond, prudent both by nature and experience, cannot coincide with Mrs. Hephzibah's vehement manner of regarding things; and she, who is all fire and energy, quickly loses patience with his cautious circumspection.

‘Ah!’ says Mr. Bond reflectively. ‘We too often come across such cases in our profession. “Marry in haste and repent at leisure” is as true a proverb as any. At the

same time, it behoves us to be very careful how we put our finger between the fire and the wood.'

'Which means, that when our friends get into difficulties, it's better, in our own interests, that we should sneak quietly round the corner, and leave them to get out of them as they best may,' replied Mrs. Hephzibah sharply. 'Yes—that may be *your* theory, but it's not mine!'

'But, my dear lady, as a rule, you know that there is no way in which a woman *can* rid herself of the inconveniences occasioned by an unsuitable marriage, except one.'

'And a nice set of men they must have been who first sat down to frame a law the alternatives of which were, misery or crime. But she can take out a protection-order against him, surely!'

'If she has accumulated property by her

own earnings which her husband dissipates to minister to his vices, adding cruelty to the theft, I should think she undoubtedly would have a claim to one. But has the gentleman in question laid himself open to any such charge ?

‘The “gentleman in question,” as you term him—the blackguard, as *I* should call him, has done everything under the sun to entitle him to penal servitude for life, in my opinion.’

And here Mrs. Horton details as much as is necessary of Delia Moray’s circumstances and history, to which Mr. Bond listens attentively, lying back in his office-chair with his eyes closed and his hands slowly rubbing one over the other.

‘Goodness me, man! are you listening to me?’ exclaims Mrs. Hephzibah suddenly, as, bringing her story to a close, she turns and confronts the placid-looking little so-

licitor. Mr. Bond leaps as if he had been shot.

‘Of course, Mrs. Horton, of course I am. I have been pondering your friend’s case all the while. But it hardly appears to me, as far as I understand the circumstances, that she is in a position to avail herself of the conditions you mentioned.’

‘Not of a protection-order! Why who on earth was it constituted for, if not for women in Delia Moray’s position?’

‘Well, without going into the matter more thoroughly, I am not quite prepared to acquiesce with you. The provisions of the Act, if I remember rightly——’

‘Have you ever read them?’ demands his client abruptly. ‘Do you know what you are talking about?’

Mr. Bond bows and smiles deprecatingly. But he would scarcely like to be put through

a catechism on the question under discussion by his formidable opponent.

‘Certainly. It is scarcely probable I should not have done so. Still, the working of that particular Act has not as yet been brought fully under my notice in a legal point of view, and therefore, until I have looked a little more closely into the matter, I am hardly prepared to give a decided answer to your question.’

‘You mean, that until you have time to go home and read up all about it, you don’t know anything of the matter at all. I think you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Here is one of the most important means that has ever been brought forward for the amelioration of the position of women, and you know no more about it than Bob does of his Delectus. A publican might just as well hang out his license for selling liquor, without a drop of brandy in the house. It’s

no wonder that the poor fools who go to law to get themselves righted are led by the nose into all sorts of scrapes. It's the blind leading the blind! I suppose if a man comes to you to draw up his will, you have to consult a book of reference before you are "prepared" to tell him if it is legal to make a will or not?

'Really, Mrs. Horton! you are too hard upon me.'

'Not a bit of it. However, if you don't know under what conditions a married woman might procure a protection-order, I do.' And thereupon Mrs. Hephzibah begins to quote the law, from memory, as she did the night before to Delia Moray.

'You wish me to understand,' says Mr. Bond when she has concluded, 'that your friend is desirous to separate from her husband and to maintain herself.'

‘That’s it! She wants to get rid of a brute who ill-treats herself and her child, and squanders all her earnings.’

‘There is a family, then?’

‘There is one child—if that means a family.’

‘Of what age?’

‘I am not sure. Somewhere between seven and eight, I believe.’

‘Well, it seems to me that (always providing your memory has not played you false) the best plan would be, for your friend to establish herself in a home of her own, and if her husband persecutes her then, to take out a protection-order against him. But if he can and will support herself and the child, there is no law by which she can leave his protection.’

‘You mean, that if he provides sufficient food and clothing to prevent her becoming chargeable to the parish, he can ill-treat and

abuse her as much as he likes in private, and she has no legal redress ?

‘ I am afraid that is the law !’

‘ Bah ! a fig for your laws. They’re as useless as the men who made them. If I had been such an idiot as to put myself within their power, I’d have defied them all.’

‘ I fear you would have got yourself into terrible trouble,’ says the solicitor, with a look that intimates he would rather not have been mixed up with it.

‘ I’d have shown the world there was one woman not afraid to fight it, any way. But to return to Mrs. Moray. Shall I bring her here to speak to you, herself ?’

‘ Not until I have thought over what you have told me. Then I will let you know exactly how she stands with regard to the law.’

‘ All she wants is permission to support

herself and her child away from that man !’

‘ How will he live meanwhile ?’

‘ I am sure I don’t know, and don’t care. He has rich relations, I believe. Perhaps, if he were alone, they would come forward to help him.’

‘ Of course your friend is aware that if her husband chooses to claim the child she will have no power to oppose him.’

‘ What ! Can’t she keep her own child ?’

‘ Not if it is above seven years old, and the father will not consent to her doing so.’

‘ But no one has ever worked for its support but herself. She has kept it ever since it was born.’

‘ That is nothing to the purpose ! So long as a child is an infant—that is, under seven years of age—the law recognises the mother’s right to take care of it ; but over that age it

belongs, body and soul, to the father, always provided he can give it a home and proper support.'

'But this man is a perfect brute. He thrashes the boy till he is black and blue.'

'If Mrs. Moray can prove that her son is cruelly beaten by his father, without due cause, he will probably be bound over to keep the peace; but there is a difficulty in drawing the line between necessary chastisement and ill-treatment. Children require punishment at times, and parents are allowed to punish them. The law will not interfere unless the boy's health has been injured. There is no act more binding than that which makes the child the property of the father from the age of seven to that of sixteen.'

'Then, if I understand you rightly, should Mrs. Moray take out a protection-order

against him, she won't be able to claim the boy—as part of her right.'

'Certainly not! The child being legitimate, belongs to her husband. If he were illegitimate it would be a different thing. The mother only would then be legally recognised as his parent.'

Mrs. Hephzibah Horton does not speak for a few moments. If she were a man she would swear horribly—as she is a woman she bites her lip and is silent. But the same choleric indignation that produces oaths is rising in her breast the while, and as soon as she thinks she has obtained sufficient command over herself to speak, it bursts forth.

'So—this is your law—is it?' she exclaims, rising from her seat. 'I wonder an honest man like yourself is not ashamed to sit sniggling in your chair, and weighing it out as a grocer does his sand, pretending to think

it sugar all the while. You *must* know what a horrid cheat and fraud it is. What! You tell me there is no chance of redress for this unfortunate woman, unless she consents to part with her child—the only creature for whom she longs to burst these unnatural bonds, and live in peace! Because she has married this man—because he has sworn to love and protect her—therefore he has the right to torture her hourly by petty tyranny, or to curse her life by taking away her child! But if she had been frail instead of honest, she would at this moment have been free to quit her task-master and take her boy out of his clutches. And then you are surprised that some women should prefer freedom and poverty to the bondage of your crooked marriage laws. Why, it's enough to make the whole female race rise up as one woman and swear never to have anything to do with matrimony again!

‘My dear madam, they would only injure themselves by such a proceeding,’ remarks the little solicitor blandly. ‘If marriage has its disadvantages (which no sensible person denies), it has also its advantages.’

‘I don’t see them!’ says his client bluntly.

‘For one wife who is as unfortunately situated as Mrs. Moray, you will find a thousand who are entirely supported by their husbands’ labour. And that, after all, you will allow, is the natural state of affairs.’

‘Fiddlesticks! I allow nothing of the kind. We’ve got hands and feet, the same as you have, and double the amount of brains in our heads.’

‘Oh! that of course no one would dream of disputing,’ says Mr. Bond with a bow.

‘Don’t go nodding your head at me in that absurd manner, like a Chinese mandarin. If ’twas a little better weighted it wouldn’t be so ready to topple on one side.’

‘Really, Mrs. Horton, I must say your language is rather—rather—uncalled for.’

‘I don’t see it ! I come here to consult you about my poor friend’s difficulties, and you keep me for an hour twaddling about nothing at all, and then wind up by saying the very thing you should have said at the beginning. You’ve wasted half my morning. Do you suppose I should have stayed here trying to knock a little sense into your head, if I had known that under any circumstances that man Moray will have the power to torture his wife by keeping the boy from her ? Why, *of course* he’ll do it—because he knows nothing would persuade her to desert the child. And she’ll have to go on to the end—toiling for both of them till she sinks into her grave. God help her ! and all such unfortunate creatures, for men won’t, and it’s evident the law can’t. Here ! let me go—do ! I must tell poor Delia the upshot of

this as soon as possible, for I'm afraid I raised her hopes last night for nothing.

'No !—I don't want to shake hands with you ! You're a good enough fellow in yourself, I dare say—as men go—but it makes me sick to see you sit there and hear you confess you make your living out of a system of injustice and robbery. For though you sum it all up in those three letters, L A W, you know well enough that's just what it means.

'I'll come and see you again, some day when I've got over this, and feel in a better temper ; or, perhaps I'll run out to Hampstead next Sunday, and have tea with you and the boys. But let me go now, for the air of your room stifles me.

'Injustice and robbery ! Robbery and injustice ! That's what the whole system amounts to.'

Saying which, in no inaudible tones, Mrs.

Hephzibah stalks through the outer office into the street, leaving the clerks in a state of bewilderment as to what particular wrong she alludes.



CHAPTER VII.

‘ HERE’S A PASS FOR A WOMAN TO BE
BROUGHT TO !’

WHEN Delia Moray recovers from the fainting-fit into which misery, and fear, and emotion have combined to send her, the first sounds of which she becomes conscious are a loud knocking at the door, with a confusion of voices upon the landing, apparently engaged in altercation.

Such sentences as, ‘ *You call yourself a man !* ’ ‘ *You ought to be ashamed of yourself !* ’ ‘ *I’ll have no such goings on in my*

house !' and ' If I were you, Mrs. Timson, I'd turn him straight out into the street !' — fall with a sort of dull meaning upon her half-awakened senses ; and then the voice of her landlady is heard appealing to her—' Mrs. Moray ! my dear ! are you there, or not ? Answer me, like a good soul, or I shall have to break the door in.'

' I've already told you that she is there,' comes in sullen tones from her husband ; ' and what the deuce the whole lot of you is kicking up such a confounded row about I can't tell.'

' And who locked her in there, at dead of night, I should like to know, without fire or light, poor creature—and she been sitting up for the other brute and yourself till past twelve. ' Where's the key of the room ?'

' Aye ! hand over the key, or we'll soon know the reason why !' exclaims a masculine voice.

‘A nice sort of ’usband, to go to bed ’isself, and leave his poor wife in the dark and the cold,’ chimes in a woman.

And the lodgers appear to be pressing rather closely upon James Moray.

‘Here! stand off!’ he exclaims roughly; ‘What business have you to come bullying me in this way? If I’m not to do as I choose with my own rooms, I shall leave them to-morrow.’

‘And a good job for every one concerned in it if you would!’ retorts another voice.

Delia has staggered to her feet by this time, and is groping her way along the wall. Her head is dizzy and confused from her fall, and she goes twice round the room before she can find the door. But when she has found it, she beats with her body against the panels, crying:

‘Oh, Mrs. Timson! pray let me out, for the love of Heaven!’

‘Give me the key, you brute!’ demands the landlady of Moray.

‘Take it, you old cat!’ he retorts, flinging it towards her.

In another second she has opened the sitting-room door, and dragged the still half-conscious Delia under the gas on the landing.

‘Here’s a pretty sight!’ she exclaims witheringly, as the other lodgers, who have been roused by the contention between the married couple, crowd round her, and compassionate the wife’s condition. ‘Why, if he ’asn’t tied ’er ’ands behind her back as if she was a blackamoor! This is a pretty pass to be brought to, for a woman who slaves her life out to keep the brute who illuses her in beer and tobacco!’

‘You’d better not be abusive!’ says Moray, attempting to carry off the matter with a high hand.

‘Better not be what I’ screams Mrs. Timson in return, as she frees Delia’s hands from the whipcord. ‘Why, if you dare to speak to me again in that way, I’ll duck you head foremost in the water-butt. Abusive to *you*! If you were taken this moment and flayed alive, or cut in four-quarters and hanged, it would be a deal too good for you; and that’s *my* opinion.’

‘Yes, and everybody else’s too! You’re a nice reasonable sort of man to rouse the whole house up with your wife’s screams, and then expect us to bow down and worship you!’ says one of the lady lodgers, who is hanging over the top banisters, arrayed in a flannel gown and curl-papers.

‘I’ll tell you what it is, sir,’ adds a man’s voice: ‘this sort of thing won’t do, or we shall have to call the police in. A man’s wife is his own property, we all know that; but when it comes to tying her hands behind

her back, and beating her till she faints dead off, it seems to me to be carrying matters a leetle too far.'

'He didn't beat me,' says Delia faintly ;
'I—I—fell by myself.'

'And that's a lie !' says Mrs. Timson cheerfully ; 'however, 't isn't the first you've told for him, my honey, and I bet it won't be the last. And now, if you can stand, let me 'elp you to your bed, for that's the only place you're fit for.'

'Oh, don't leave me ! don't leave me !' exclaims Delia in an excess of terror, clinging convulsively to her humble friend.

'Don't you be afraid, dearie. I wouldn't leave you in 'is clutches again to-night, not for ever so ! Ah, Mr. Moray, it's no use your blaring at me in that fashion, for leave the poor girl I don't ; and if you attempts to stop me, I'll 'ave in the perlice as sure as

sure. And you don't come into the room neither, so never think it. You've 'ad your share of the bed for to-night, and now you can take a turn at the sitting-room, and see 'ow you likes that. And Mr. Green,' she continues, addressing one of the lodgers, 'I looks to you to see my wishes is carried out, and me and Mrs. Moray is not disturbed again till morning.' Saying which Mrs. Timson half drags, half leads Delia into the bedroom, and slams the door authoritatively after her.

James Moray, left out upon the landing, finds himself in anything but an enviable position. So long as the attention of the lodgers was divided between himself and his wife, he had some opportunity of parrying their attacks ; but now he has none, and their execrations fall upon his head like a shower of hailstones. The women, including the lady in flannel and brown paper, would dearly like to lynch

him on the spot, did not the men restrain their ardour.

But Mr. Moray, as he marches into the dark and empty sitting-room, feels very small notwithstanding. He lights the gas, brings out a bottle of brandy and a glass, and makes preparations for rekindling the fire—tries to appear, in fact, as though he had not been banished there against his will, but his efforts are in vain.

It is true that the women lodgers very shortly retire to their beds, and that the men, after a brief warning to him not to create any more disturbance that night, follow them. But James Moray knows that they have got the best of it, and that he has no power to oppose their orders. They are all low-born people, these fellow-lodgers of his, men and women much beneath him in position and birth; but they have got the upper hand of him, and he would no more dare to

set Mrs. Timson at defiance and re-enter his own bedroom, than he would attempt his wife's life or his own.

As he sits there, half clothed and wholly comfortless, trying to drown his anger and mortification in repeated glasses of brandy, he curses Delia for the part she has played in the unpleasant proceedings of the evening, and resolves to be revenged upon her for it.

What has come to her, he thinks, that she seems suddenly possessed of such a spirit of defiance and rebellion—she, who has hitherto been so meek and uncomplaining and obedient? If she had not spoken out in so determined a manner before his brother, the quarrel that subsequently took place between them would never have occurred; and if, when he thought fit to punish her, she had submitted quietly to it, as she used to do, Mrs. Timson and her lodgers would not have

been awakened from their slumbers to take the law into their own hands.

As James Moray reviews the day's work, and the ignominious part he has had to play in it, he applies himself again and again to the brandy to dispel the unpleasant memory. He can hear the low sobbing voice of his wife in the next room, and he knows she is relating the whole story of his treatment of herself and the child to the landlady, and that the woman will sympathise with her, and retail it to the entire household, and his name will be passed from one low mouth to another, coupled with every possible term of abuse.

By Jove, he won't stand it! No man would stand it. He shall give Mrs. Timson notice to quit with daylight, and remove his family to another lodging as soon as possible. But suppose Delia refuses to go! Suppose she makes it a stipulation of her continuing

to work for him, that she and her child remain under the protection of Mrs. Timson and her fellow-lodgers.

The idea is so unpleasant that Moray is again compelled to have recourse to the brandy bottle, in order to drive it away. The liquor he took upon the previous evening, combined with his fresh potations, begins to have a strong effect upon him. Delia and the child, and Mrs. Green and Mrs. Timson are all mixed up in inextricable confusion, as his head falls drowsily forward on his breast. He sleeps and dreams—some horrid nightmare dream, occasioned by the perturbation of his spirit, from which he awakes with a start and an oath, and with drops of perspiration, notwithstanding the cold night, upon his forehead. He darts at the brandy again, and drains half a tumbler at a draught. And with that he sleeps once more—the dead, unbroken sleep of the drunken, and the sub-

dued November light dawns upon his insensible face and figure, stretched helplessly upon the hearthrug, where he subsided in his last attempts to settle himself comfortably in the armchair.

* * * *

As soon as Delia can remember anything clearly, she remembers her child. Poor little Willy, trembling from the chastisement he has received, and frightened beyond measure at the sounds of quarrelling that reach him from the landing, is weeping silently in his cot when his mother and Mrs. Timson enter the room. But with the sight of them, his two best friends, his tears subside, and with the sight of him the remembrance of what he has been subjected to flashes back upon Delia's mind.

‘Oh, he beat my poor child!’ she exclaims, making for the cot with all the speed her feeble limbs can boast of. ‘He’s got the

croup, and James wouldn't let me go to him. I remember it all now ; and when he cried for me his father beat him. God forgive the man ! He beat the child when he was ill ' and sinking on her knees by Willy's bed, she catches the boy to her heart, and bursts into a flood of tears.

' Well, you may pray " God forgive him ! " but it's more than I should do, the cowardly brute ! ' replies Mrs. Timson. ' I heard him whacking some one, but I thought 'twas you. And now, my dear, let me put you to bed, or you'll be dead beat before the morning.'

' O no ! Mrs. Timson, I must attend to the boy first. He has caught cold from being out so late at night, and has all the symptoms of croup. Just feel his hands ! How hot they are ! And listen to his breathing ! If I do not give him the proper remedies at once, he will be seriously ill. No, no ! don't cry, my darling,' she continues, as a paroxysm

of coughing comes on, and Willy beats the air with his hands in spasmodic efforts to catch his breath. 'Mother has come now! Mother will give her dear little boy something to make him well. Be patient, my Willy, and lie still, and I will get some stuff that will do you good.'

With trembling, eager hands, she finds the necessary medicine, and measures it out for the child; whilst good-hearted Mrs. Timson, first taking the precaution to lock her *protégés* carefully into the room, goes downstairs in search of wood and coal wherewith to kindle a fire; and before long, Willy, being relieved of the oppression on his chest, has been put into a hot bath and rolled in a warm blanket, and has fallen to sleep in his cot again, with a gentle moisture breaking out over his skin.

And then, freed from the first pressing anxiety concerning her child, Delia crouches

down upon the hearthrug, and leaning her head against the knee of her friendly landlady, relieves her over-charged heart by telling her in broken accents the sad history of her married life.

‘I *must* tell you something first,’ she says in answer to the woman’s entreaties that she will try and take a little rest, ‘for I want your assistance and your advice, Mrs. Timson. I cannot bear this life any longer! I have made up my mind to leave him.’

‘And quite right too,’ boldly acquiesces Mrs. Timson. ‘I’m sure it’s a wonder you’ve ever stayed with him so long; and if you’ve got friends to help you, my dearie, why the sooner you goes to them the better. And I’ll do all in my power to aid you, for one.’

Delia presses the landlady’s hand in silence. She perceives the mistake Mrs. Timson has made. She thinks she is happy enough to

possess kind relations : a father and mother perhaps, or a married sister, able and willing to receive her in time of trouble. She doesn't know what an unfortunate, friendless creature she is. But Delia sees her way to take advantage of the wrong impression she has unintentionally given. Perhaps the landlady will be more ready to assist her in her undertaking if she does not know she is going forth upon the world, alone and utterly dependent upon herself. So, without asserting, she does not deny the fact.

‘Thank you!’ she murmurs. ‘You are very kind to me. I have borne his cruelty for several years, Mrs. Timson, and have told no one ; but now I feel it has gone too far. For myself I care little. He has killed every spark of hope in my breast long ago ; but I cannot see my child half killed under my very eyes without making one effort to save him.’

‘And when will you go, my poor dear? and how?’

‘That is just what I want to speak to you about. I am afraid I shall not be able to leave the house unknown to Mr. Moray without your assistance. There are only Willy’s clothes and mine to take—few enough—a bundle will carry them easily. If I make it up, will you take charge of it downstairs until I can find an opportunity to slip away? You know it must be in the morning, that I may be able to get settled before night, and I must wait, too, until Willy is well enough to move; but whenever it happens,’ says Delia, turning round and gazing with her great, earnest, Irish eyes into Mrs. Timson’s face, ‘*promise me*, dear friend, that you will not let him know which way I went or when. Don’t let him track me, if possible, for I live in terror of him now, and I shall live doubly in terror of him then.’

‘My dear, don’t you be afraid. If ever that creature as calls ’isself a man finds you out again, ’twon’t be by means of Theresa Timson; for I’ll throw ’im downstairs and break ’is legs myself before ’e should have the opportunity of tracking you from *this* ’ouse.’

‘I *know* you will keep your word,’ replies Delia. ‘It cannot be for long, Mrs. Timson. He must find me out sooner or later through the people at the theatre. But if I can only gain a little time to think—to arrange my plans—to get my friends to act in my behalf.’

‘Lor’! now, what a pity your friends can’t take you right off that nasty stage and let you live quiet for the rest of your life, isn’t it? Haven’t you got a ma who’d be pleased to have you at home to help her house-keep and such like?’

Delia shakes her head.

‘I have no parents! I am an orphan. Do you think if it had been otherwise, that my husband would have *dared* to treat me as he has done? Why, my father was a captain in the—but what is the use of speaking of that?’ says Delia, recollecting herself; ‘it cannot help me now. I married this man, I placed myself in his power. No father could have taken me out of that.’

‘Well, you take yourself out of it—that’s my advice to you, dearie,’ replies Mrs. Timson, ‘and I’m sure it’s a miracle you’ve stood it so long. And you on the stage, too. I dare say now there’s many and many a young spark would have took you away from him before this, if you’d had a mind to go.’

‘No one could ever have made me give up my good name,’ says Delia proudly, ‘for it belongs to my child, Mrs. Timson, and he is everything I have.’

‘Ah! well! I ’ope ’e may be preserved to

you, but it's 'ard to say. I wouldn't set my 'art too much on 'im if I was you, for 'e's as weak a child on 'is legs as ever I see !

The delivery of this sorry comfort makes the poor mother weep afresh.

‘ O ! I know it ! I know it ! but think then what it must have been for me to see him beaten upon the slightest occasion—thrashed, shut up, sometimes starved—and all that his father might be revenged upon me, because I did not make money fast enough, or refused to let him squander it on his own pleasure when made. O ! Mrs. Timson ! pity me ! pity me ! for I am the most miserable wife and mother upon earth !’

‘ Now look’ee here, my dear. If you go on in this way, you’ll be downright ill. Now, what I wants you to do is this. Show me the things that are to be made into that bundle, and then lie down and take a rest. I won’t leave you—I promise faithful—but

I'll just pack the clothes up whilst you lie down, and 'ave them ready against the morn-ing. And then, the first good opportunity as 'appens, off you goes.'

'How can I ever thank you enough?' says Delia.

'I don't want thanks. No woman—as calls 'erself a woman—could see another in such trouble and not lend a 'elping 'and. There now, get into bed and take your boy alongside of you, and don't wake up until I tells you that it's morning!'

And Delia Moray, worn out by the events of the day, and with complete trust in Mrs. Timson's word, really does fall into a broken slumber, with Willy clasped close to her yearning breast.

Meanwhile the landlady works at her self-appointed task, and packs the scanty wardrobes ready for removal. The sacrifice she makes in assisting her lodger to seek other quarters

is not so great as it appears upon first sight. For though Mrs. Moray is a favourite of hers and a regular payer, so long as her husband is tacked on to her she cannot cease to be a nuisance in any lodging-house. James Moray's dissipated habits, and late hours, and ill-treatment of his wife are a constant source of complaints from Mrs. Timson's other lodgers, and several of them have affirmed that the Morays must leave the house or they shall.

Once quit of Delia and the child, Mrs. Timson knows the husband will soon follow. He has no means of paying his rent, and probably would refuse to pay it if he had, so she foresees that the first day it is due will find that gentleman turned into the street.

But, to do her justice, she would assist Delia in escaping from her tormentor under any circumstances. And when the morning fairly dawns—the same bright, cold morning

on which Mrs. Hephzibah Horton sought an interview with Mr. Bond—it is with much satisfaction that she wakes the wife with the information that her husband is lying helplessly drunk in the next room, and that, if the child is well enough to be moved, the next few hours are her own.

‘‘E’s lying there on the ‘earthrug like a ‘elpless log, my dear, and my parlour stinking of his beer and bacca to that degree, it would take a week to sweeten it. When I see ‘im just now I could ‘ave kicked ‘im as he lay—I could really ! But if you want to give ‘im the slip, now’s your time, for ‘e’s safe to lie there till noon, if not longer—the nasty beast ! When I see a man in that state, I thank the Lord that made me a widder—I do indeed !—for talk of ‘usbands, Timson was a caution, I can tell you, and that’s what makes my ‘art feel for you so, poor dear ! And now, what do you say ? Is your name Walker, or is it not ?

Delia, refreshed by her short slumber, and with courage renovated by the bright, cheerful-looking morning, wakes up her boy and finds his symptoms of the night before so much decreased, that she answers the landlady's question in the affirmative.

And two hours afterwards, whilst James Moray still sleeps his drunken sleep upon the hearthrug, the figure of a woman carrying a bundle on her arm and leading a little boy by the hand, steals quietly away from the dizzy lodgings in the city, and takes tickets at the nearest metropolitan railway station for Holloway.

And Mrs. Timson, meanwhile, rubbing her hands in the kitchen, hears the hall-door shut and says to herself :

‘ Well, she’s off, thank ’Evin ! and I can take my Bible oath I didn’t see her go, nor I don’t know where she’s gone neither. It was like ’er, poor soul, to promise to send me

the week's rent on Saturday, in case the brute upstairs don't pay me, which I bet 'e never will. But as soon as ever 'e comes to again, I'll 'ave it out with 'im, or my name's not Teresa Timson !'



CHAPTER VIII.

‘THE MOTHER IS SURE TO FOLLOW.’

MR. WILLIAM MORAY, knocking at the door of his brother’s lodgings, at about eight o’clock the same evening, is received by Mrs. Timson with a face of such portentous gravity that he is fain to observe it.

‘Anything the matter?’ he inquires curiously.

‘Matter enough,’ is the answer. ‘I’ve kept a lodging-’ouse now, on and off, for the last two-and-thirty year, but never in all my borned days did I ’ave such a disgraceful

scene on my premises as took place 'ere last night.'

'Indeed! I hope it had nothing to do with my brother.'

'Adn't it to do with your brother, then, which, if you knows anything about 'im, you must know 'e's the tipsiest, swaggeringest, most foul-mouthed creetur as ever presumed to impose on an honest body as 'as paid her way regular and——'

'Come, come, my good woman! all this has nothing to do with me. Please let me pass.'

'Don't you try to come over me with your "good womaning," for I won't 'ave none of it. And look 'ee 'ere, Mr. Moray, there's a week's rent doo for that man's rooms to-morrow, besides three-and-sixpence for coal, and if you don't make 'im pay it, or pay it yourself, out 'e goes into the street, without so much as "with your leave" or "by your

leave." And now you 'as my mind, and you can make what you like of it.'

This speech quite takes Mr. Moray aback. He knows that his brother's dissipated habits lay him open to a great deal of insolence and abuse on the part of his landlady, but Delia has always been so careful to pay the rent out of her weekly salary, that he has never been subjected before to any demands from Mrs. Timson on that account. So he stares at the woman in complete amazement, and thinks she must have been taking a leaf out of James's book.

'Really, Mrs. Timson, your lodger's rent has nothing to do with me. Why don't you ask the lady to settle it?'

'Because she ain't here — that's why! She's run away from 'im, and I 'ope with all my 'art she may never see 'is face again; and if he attempts to get 'old of 'er, up into court we goes, one and all, and swears to

what we see take place last night in this very 'ouse. For he tied that poor thing's 'ands behind 'er back and locked 'er up in the dark and the cold, whilst the child was screaming 'is life out for 'is mammy; and every soul in the place roused up and come downstairs and see it. And I tells you, sir, once for all, that if you don't pay 'is rent in advance or take 'im away from 'ere I'll turn 'im out neck and crop, and if 'e starves in the street it'll be no more than he deserves——'

'I would rather hear this story from my brother's lips,' says Mr. Moray, passing her on the staircase, 'and then I shall be better able to speak to you about it.'

'And a nice account 'e'll be able to give you,' she screams after him; 'why 'e was dead drunk till past three this afternoon, and can't carry a glass steady to his lips even now. He don't remember a thing what took place, but I do, and I means to act

on it, and so you may tell the brute—
drat 'im !'

But Mr. Moray having already reached the third landing, Mrs. Timson's parting adjuration is lost upon him. He turns the handle of his brother's door, and walks in. James is seated at the table, only partially sober, with his head bowed down upon his outstretched arms.

'Holloa !' exclaims William Moray, 'why, what's the matter now, Jem? The old woman downstairs has been giving me a garbled account of your wife having run away from you—but it isn't true, surely?'

'Cursed if I know,' rejoins the other. 'She ain't here—that's very certain.'

'How did it happen? Tell me all about it.'

'I don't know how it happened. She aggravated me to that extent last night that she drove me to take a drop more than was

good for me, I suppose, and I didn't wake till this afternoon, and then she had been gone for hours—so the old cat tells me !'

'She can't intend to remain away——'

'Can't say, I'm sure! I think she threatened me with something of the kind last night. Didn't you hear her?'

'Yes; but I never imagined she was in earnest! Women say so many things they don't mean when they are in a passion. She's gone off, probably, to try and frighten you. She's sure to come back again, if it's only to see the child——'

'But she's taken the child with her and every one of his clothes and all her own, besides every shilling we had in the house. It's cruel of her,' says James, relapsing into the tearful state which so often succeeds drunkenness, 'to leave me all alone here without a blessed coin in my pocket, and no

one to see after me. I didn't think she could be so cruel !'

William Moray whistles suggestively. ♡

'I am afraid you must have been carrying on a little bit too far with her !' he says, after a pause.

'Well, I hit her—I know I did. I don't want to deny it. Hasn't a man the right to hit his own wife—the woman he keeps and pays for? Well, not exactly that, perhaps, but still she promised to love and honour me, you know, and she didn't do it, and so I consider I had a right to hit her, and the child too, if I chose. I maintain,' continues James, rising from his chair and attempting with drunken eloquence to wave his hand, 'that when a man has a wife who——'

'Sit down—sit down !' says his brother curtly, as he pushes him back into his seat.

James makes no remonstrance. He only

stares at William vacantly as he subsides again, and running his fingers through his hair, heaves a deep sigh, and lays his head down upon the table as before.

‘Listen to me, Jem,’ continues Mr. Moray ;
‘I want to speak seriously to you. Tell me the truth. Is that woman your wife or not?’

‘Of course she’s my wife !’

‘I see no “of course” in the matter. After that terrible scrape you got into at Glasgow you disappeared altogether from society, and never communicated with your family for four or five years. Then you suddenly turn up in London, and I find you living with a lady who you say is married to you, but who is not in the position from which men of our standing usually choose their wives.’

‘Well ! how could I help it?’ grumbles James. ‘I couldn’t get any employment

after that cursed business in Glasgow, and Delia can make money, and how were we to live else? You wouldn't have had me starve, would you? or break stones? If the governor hadn't been so beastly unforgiving and cut me out of his will, I suppose we should have been living like other people. But anyway we were married fast enough, at Chilton in Berwickshire, and we've got the certificate of it—at least, Delia has, for I suppose the jade has taken it with her.'

'Then the boy is legitimate.'

'Well, I can't say more than I have, can I? I tell you we were married. Isn't that enough?'

'Very good; I'll take you at your word, but you'll excuse me if I had my doubts. Your behaviour to your wife is so different from what one usually expects to see under the circumstances. Now do you think that she can have got an inkling of where we took

the boy last night, and carried him off in consequence ?

‘How can I tell ? These women have ears all round in my experience.’

‘Because that is rather an important matter to decide. You see, the case is, James, you can’t *afford* to part with this woman just yet.’

‘How do you mean ?’

‘Well, to speak plainly—you won’t support yourself and I can’t support you. Therefore you must use every possible means to make her come back to you.’

‘But suppose she *won’t* come back,’ whines James, ‘how can I make her ? She earns enough money to support herself, and she knows how ill I am, that I am unable to do any work, or to stand any fatigue ; and if she stays away and you won’t make me an allowance, I shall starve or go to the workhouse, for there’s nothing else left for me !’

‘Hush ! don’t talk such nonsense,’ interrupts his brother authoritatively. ‘We must *force* Mrs. Moray to return to you, and we must do it by means of the child.’

‘But she’s got the child !’

‘She has no claim to him. I think you told me he was seven years old on his last birthday. You can legally take him from her again.’

‘But then I shall have to support him—and how am I to support myself?’

‘I do wish you would hear me to the end, and not keep on interrupting so. The first thing we must do is to find out your wife’s present address. That is easily accomplished by having her followed home from the theatre. Then you must claim and take away the child. The mother is certain to follow it, and with a little judgment we shall probably be able to bring her to accept any terms we choose.’

‘ But suppose she doesn’t follow it ?’

‘ Then I am prepared to carry out what I proposed to you last night, though I cannot say that my wife fell in very readily with my views. She considers the boy so plain. And I am sure she would never consent to receive him if she knew his mother was an actress or even alive. I have represented him to her, therefore, as a motherless child of yours by an early and imprudent marriage, whom I am desirous, in the event of your death, of adopting as my son ; and if she allows me to carry out my own views concerning him, it is as much as she will do. She’s a good woman, but her opinions are decided, and as she has had no children of her own she is apt to be a little jealous of my approaching the subject. But it is very premature to talk of these things. Your wife appears fond of the child, and I believe you have only to claim him to secure her return to you.’

‘And then she’ll steal him back and give us all the same trouble over again,’ says James Moray. ‘You don’t know how she went on at me last night, William ! She declared as there was a God in heaven it should be for the last time.’

‘What should be for the last time ?’

‘O, I don’t know ! Some rubbish or other. Just because I boxed her ears, or something of that sort.’

‘If your landlady speaks the truth, you went a great deal farther than that, Jem ; and you’ll get into a scrape if you don’t take care. You’ve got no discretion whatever. So long as you left the child alone, you might do anything you chose with that woman. However, you’ve been foolish enough to drive her to take the law into her own hands ; and what we’ve got to do is to decide on the best plan of circumventing her. I will prevent her stealing the boy

again, until something is settled for the future between you, by taking him home to Brixton for a few days. When your wife comes here and finds him gone, you must refuse even to tell her where he is until she comes to terms ; and when she understands she has no legal claim upon the child, she will promise anything so long as he is restored to her.'

'And a nice life I shall live between the two when we come together again,' says James Moray sulkily.

'I can't help that, Jem. You won't work, and you cannot expect me to keep you.'

'I *can't* work ; you know I am not strong enough.'

'I know you have drunk yourself into so precarious a condition, that your life is not worth a day's purchase. It's no use your shuddering at my words, Jem ; you know that they are true, and that the doctor has

confirmed them. It is folly to refuse to look the future in the face.'

'Well, it isn't pleasant to be constantly reminded of it. You're always dinning the fact into my ears that I may die any day.'

'It can't hasten matters, you know. And if I have alluded to it rather frequently of late, it has been on account of the child. I suppose if my father were alive, or I had any other nephews and nieces, I shouldn't think so much about it; but when you're gone, your boy will be the only near relation I have left, and I think it's only fair he should inherit my money.'

'I think so too, considering the governor left you my share as well as your own.'

'You lost it by your misconduct, Jem; but if my father had known you were married and had a child, I think he would have acted differently. However, it's no use talking of

that now. But as your life is not likely to be a lengthy one, I am willing to adopt Willie after your decease, and bring him up to the business, on one condition—that his mother has nothing more to do with him ; and you must draw up your will to that effect. As your wife is perfectly able to support herself, I have the less hesitation in suggesting this. She will doubtless marry again, and have another family, and——’

‘Hem ! Pass the bottle, will you ?’ interrupts his brother, in a peevish tone. ‘It’s enough to give any fellow the blues to hear you talk in that cold-blooded manner of what everybody intends to do after he’s dead and buried.’

‘Well, the oftener you drown unpleasant fancies in that way, the sooner you will turn them into facts,’ remarks Mr. Moray, as he complies with his request. ‘However, please yourself.’

James takes a glass of brandy, drains it, and shudders.

‘What do you propose to do first?’ he asks, after a pause.

‘Just what I said. Leave it to me, and I’ll manage the whole affair. When I have got the boy safe at Brixton, I will let you know.’

‘Delia will be after him here like a shot, and half kill me to get at the truth.’

‘Is she that sort of woman? I shouldn’t have thought it. Well, tell her the truth, then. Say I wish to keep the boy. It will be all the better for your purpose, and make her see she is in your power. Then I will come over, and we can make terms with her between us. Don’t say a word about the will you intend to make. I don’t want to have anything to do with the child during your lifetime, and matters will arrange themselves afterwards. Meanwhile, if she thought it

was not for a permanency, we might not find your wife quite so reasonable as I hope to do. The matter lies in a nutshell. She must either do her duty, or give up her child.

‘And suppose she chooses to give up the child? Who is to support me?’

‘We can talk of that afterwards. But she won’t choose!’

‘Well, what am I to do till she comes back, then? She’s taken all the money she had with her, and she’ll draw her salary to-morrow evening; but not a cursed halfpenny of it shall I see! It’s cruel of her to leave a fellow in such a plight!’

‘Here! hold up, man! Don’t snivel! I am going to settle the rent for you this week, and there’s a sovereign to go on with,’ throwing it down on the table. ‘But, for Heaven’s sake, Jem! don’t go and get drunk again to-night: for the woman of the house

declared she'd turn you out into the street if you did, and she looks every inch as if she'd keep her word !'

'Let's go out somewhere together, old boy,' says James, staggering to his feet.

'No ; not to-night, Jem ! [I've got this business to think over, and I promised my wife to be home early into the bargain. Go to bed at a decent hour for once, there's a good fellow, and try and get some natural rest. I am sure you need it.'

And, indeed, a single glance at James Moray's hollow cheeks, and blood-shot eyes, and trembling frame, is to acquiesce in his brother's opinion.

The poor wretch makes some sort of promise to do as he is advised, and subsides again into his old despondent attitude. As William crosses the threshold and looks back at him, he thinks he has seldom seen a more pitiable object.

‘The sooner he is gone, the better for all parties,’ he says to himself, as he descends the stairs and summons Mrs. Timson to receive her rent.

So there is but one opinion with regard to James Moray. Every condition of ill into which mankind can fall has its compassionators, except his. Anger, contempt, surprise, indifference, hatred—all are hurled at the drunkard’s head. But he misses the two sublimest gifts that mortals can bestow on one another. No one gives him either pity or patience.



CHAPTER IX.

‘HE HAS THE LAW, BUT YOU HAVE THE MONEY!’

THERE has been another visitor, besides Mr. William Moray, to the apartments Delia used to occupy, and that is Mrs. Hephzibah Horton.

When she finds that her young friend does not appear at her rooms as she invited her to do, to hear the result of the interview with Mr. Bond, she dons her stout boots and waterproof, and goes round to the dingy rooms in the city to ascertain the cause. It is Mrs. Hephzibah’s first visit there; for

Delia has always been so much afraid of the reception her husband might accord her benefactress, that she has begged her not to put herself in his way, and has carefully concealed from him the obligations she is under to Mrs. Horton ; for James Moray, like many another scoundrel who is not too proud to live upon the wages of a woman's work, would at any time have considered himself insulted by a stranger offering to lighten the burden he had without scruple put upon shoulders unequal to its weight.

But when Mrs. Hephzibah finds that Delia does not keep her promise on a subject so important to her own interests, she is afraid that some further ill-treatment may have prevented her fulfilling it, and determines to make inquiries for herself. When she discloses her wishes to Mrs. Timson, she hears, of course, the whole history of the wife's ill-usage and flight, garnished with the land-

lady's own opinions on the subject, and a graphic account of the then condition of James Moray, who is semi-intoxicated and wholly in bed, though it is but the twelfth hour of the day; for this interview takes place on the morning after Delia left her home, and Mr. William Moray thought he had settled matters entirely to his own satisfaction and the well-being of his unfortunate brother.

Mrs. Horton does not know what to make of the business, and whether to rejoice or mourn over the decisive step Delia has taken. She fears she has been mostly influenced by the conversation they held the night before, and that she may blame her for a false counsellor when she discovers that, *under any circumstances*, she has no right to keep her boy. However, there is nothing to be done but to wait for the result.

Mrs. Timson does not know Delia's ad-

dress, nor even in which direction she has gone, and subsequent inquiry of the stage door-keeper of the 'Corinthian' elicits no further information. So Mrs. Horton is obliged to return to her own rooms in a very unsatisfactory state of mind, and resolve to wait patiently until Delia shall think fit to communicate with her. She has not to wait long.

On the fourth day after Mrs. Moray left her husband, she rushes suddenly into Mrs. Horton's room, and, without preface or apology for the intrusion, gasps out :

'They have stolen my boy from me ! They have come by night, and stolen away my boy out of his very bed ! Tell me how I can get him back again, or be revenged upon them, for mercy's sake, or I shall go mad !'

The poor girl looks as if she were going mad, as she paces up and down the apart-

ment, choking with anger and emotion ; her hair hanging down her back, her hat half off her head, and the rest of her clothes thrown on anyhow.

‘God bless my soul, Delia Moray, how can I or anybody else understand what you have to say, whilst you keep trotting up and down the room in that fashion ? Come and sit down like a good child, and tell me all about it, and then perhaps I may be able to advise you on the subject.’

‘I can’t sit down. I have not sat down since I went home last night and found he was gone. The cruel heartless wretches ! After all I have suffered, couldn’t they have left me my poor sickly child ? O, Mrs. Horton ! I wish I could die ! I wish I could fall down on the carpet this moment and remember nothing and nobody ever again !’

‘That’s a sensible sort of wish to have

when you know your boy wants a mother more than most boys. Now do try and be reasonable, there's nothing makes me more angry than to hear people declare, as soon as they're in trouble, that they wish they were dead! It isn't true, you know. If you really were to die, at a moment's warning, you wouldn't like it.'

'If they keep Willie from me, there is nothing left to live for.'

'You're talking in riddles to me, my dear, and it seems likely I shall have to unravel them as I best may. However, I know so far, that you made an effort to free yourself from that man, for as you didn't come here to learn what news I had for you from my solicitor, I walked round to your place on Friday, and heard the whole story from your landlady.'

The mention of the solicitor arrests Delia's attention.

‘O, what did he say?’ she inquires eagerly, as she stops before Mrs. Horton. ‘Is there any hope for me? Shall I be allowed to live in peace with my boy?’

‘I won’t tell you a word of what he said, until you have given me some account of your own doings since we parted. Now, I put it to you, Delia Moray, is it fair? You rush into my room like a whirlwind, and talk in the most incoherent style, without the least regard for my feelings of curiosity; but directly I mention something that interests you, you are ready to put me through a catechism, and make me answer succinctly into the bargain.’

‘Forgive me!’ cries Delia, ‘but I am so distracted with grief and anxiety, I hardly know what I am doing. I will tell you all I know, dear Mrs. Horton. It is not much. I took my boy to Holloway. I had been there once to see a friend in the profession,

and I knew I could get cheap and clean rooms. Besides, I wanted her guarantee for my respectability, for I had only five shillings to go on with till I drew my weekly salary.'

'Why didn't you come to me?' demanded Mrs. Hephzibah gruffly.

'I was so afraid of being tracked and followed, I wanted to get out of this part of the town as quickly as possible. Well, I got a room—only one, but it did very well for Willie and me, and I gave my name as Mrs. Brown, and settled myself there. O, it was so sweet and quiet, just for three days. Willie was so happy; the dear little fellow chattered and laughed more than I have ever seen him do before, for I told him we were going to live alone, and his father should never come and beat him again. I put him to bed each night before I went to the theatre, and he slept so soundly till the

morning, and I should have come here to-day, any way, to tell you how comfortable we were ; but last night, when I went home from the 'Corinthian,' he was gone—they had stolen my child from me !

'Who do you mean by "they" ?'

'His father, I suppose, and Mr. William Moray. The woman of the house said that when I had been gone about an hour, two gentlemen came and asked for the child ; and when she refused to let them go up into the room, one of them said he was Willie's father, and threatened to have in a policeman if she didn't give him up at once. So she was frightened, and she—she—let him go,' says Delia, breaking down at last with the recollection of her loss.

'What did you do ?'

'I couldn't do anything last night. It was twelve o'clock before I heard of it. But the first thing this morning, I went to Mrs.

Timson to ask if Willie was there, but he is not, and she says Mr. Moray has never even mentioned him. So they must have taken him off to some strange place, and I shall never see him again. I am sure I never shall !’

‘Don’t talk nonsense ! Their only reason in kidnapping the boy is to induce you to follow him.’

‘But they will gain nothing by that, for when I find him I shall take him back again. No power on earth shall prevent my doing so.’

‘I am afraid there is a power that can prevent it, my dear, and that is the law !’

‘The law ! O, Mrs. Horton ! you said it would protect me. You said it would enable me to live apart from James, and support myself !’

‘Delia Moray ! it is a very humiliating

thing to have to confess that you are a fool ; but if ever there was a fool, it is I. Since I saw you last, I've been obliged to acknowledge the truth of the proverb, " A little learning is a dangerous thing."'

' But you did not—you cannot have made a mistake.'

' Not with respect to yourself—but the child. He's over seven years old, and that old fool Bond tells me that after that age, you have no legal claim to him.'

' *No legal claim* to my own child that I brought into the world ! No claim ! I—his mother. No right to supply him with the necessaries of life which his father won't work to do. O, Mrs. Horton ! it cannot—*cannot* be true !'

' It is true, Delia Moray, and a more infamous law was never enacted. But Mr. Bond was clear enough on the subject. He says no law in the calendar is more stringent

or binding in its effects. A married woman has no right to the protection of her child after it is seven years old.'

'A *married* woman! Why a married woman?' cried Delia quickly.

'Because, if you were *not* married to that inhuman brute, you might take your child away from him to-morrow, and no one would dare to say you "nay;" because, if you were *not* married, you would have the sole right to keep, and love, and protect him, and you might imprison the father for not contributing to his support. That's the law of England, Delia Moray, and you may take it and make what you like of it, for I am sure that no one with any sense would desire to dispute the possession with you. When that old fool Bond made it plain to me, I could have torn every hair out of his head with the greatest pleasure.'

Meanwhile Delia Moray, having sunk into

a chair, is repeating in a stupefied manner to herself :

‘ *Not* mine ! My Willie *not* mine. God in heaven ! be merciful to me, and let me die !’

‘ It had been better if you had prayed that prayer before you ever brought him into the world,’ says her friend grimly. ‘ It’s much too late now. What you’ve got to do now, is to live and look after him !’

‘ But how can I look after him if his father has the power to keep him from me ? How can I live to love and protect him, if I am so impotent that I may not pass through the door the law of England closes in my face ? Lord God ! is it possible that Christian mothers may be denied the same privileges that the brutes of the field enjoy ? I am not a good woman, I know. I have never been what people call a religious woman, but I

have been a good mother, and I defy the world to disprove it. But what is the use of it all if it is to end in this—that after having reared my little one through the dangers of infancy, and kept him alive only by my labour and my care, he is to be torn from my breast as though I were nothing and nobody? Why do we ever bring children into the world --why do we suffer so much for a reward like this?

‘If I were not tired of hearing myself repeat the same argument, Delia Moray, I should say, because the majority of women enter into marriage without any knowledge of the characters of the men to whom they entrust the happiness of themselves and their children. However, talking won’t mend such matters. The law of the land and the circumstances of your life don’t *fit*, and the only thing left for you to do is to submit to one alternative or the other. Either to part

with your child, or to put up with your husband.'

'O, Mrs. Horton! I *cannot* part with Willie. He is all I have. There would be nothing left to live for, or to work for, without him.'

'Then you'll have to accept such terms as Mr. Moray may choose to offer you.'

'If he refuses to give up the child, I must go back, even if he kills me.'

'O, he won't do that! You needn't be afraid. You are the goose with the golden eggs, and it would be altogether against his interests to wring your neck. He will only pull it a little every day, my dear. Give you a pinch and let you go again, as a cat plays with the mouse between its claws, until your back is bent and your hair has grown grey in his service, and death will perhaps mercifully deliver you from his clutches just

as you've grown utterly indifferent to all outward things.'

'You are laughing at me, Mrs. Horton. O! it is cruel to laugh when I am in such pain.'

'I am quite sure I don't feel like laughing, Delia Moray. It is the most pitiful sight to me under the sun, to see such a number of my sister women in bondage worse than death. I would free you all if it were in my power, and set you working for yourselves, independent of the world!'

'We can never be independent nor free,' says Mrs. Moray, 'whilst we are mothers. But it is impossible you can know what I feel. You, who have never had a child.'

Mrs. Hephzibah, for all her vaunted independence, does not quite like this accusation. There are sweets and bitters in all lives; she knows it well, and the bitterest part of freedom is its solitude. Sometimes, in her

very weak moments, she has thought she could bear anything, only to hear a child's voice call her 'Mother !'

But she shakes off the weakness like a serpent that may sting. A child entails a husband. As well drink poison for the sake of its flavour. Bah ! what can she have been thinking of, to entertain the idea even for a moment !

And the voice in which she answers Delia is quite in accordance with her general principles.

'No, my dear ! I have not. Thank goodness for it ! and, I may add, my own sense. If you play with knives, and get your fingers cut, it's useless railing against the weapon ; better blame your own carelessness. However, I *do* feel for the scrape you are in, with all my heart, and wish I could help you out of it. Have you no idea where Willie can be ?'

‘Not the slightest.’

‘Well, I have then. Mrs. Timson told me that from what she could gather (with her ear at the key-hole, of course—they a” do it!) of the conversation that took place between that drunken husband of yours and his brother, the day you left home, she thinks when they took Willie out with them the evening before, it was to William Moray’s house—and I expect that is where you’ll find him now.’

‘At Brixton?’

‘Yes, at Brixton—if that is where the man lives. What is the address?’

‘I don’t know. I have never been there. The William Morays don’t think me good enough to visit them.’

‘It is easily found. Just hand me down that Post Office Directory. Here it is: “Moray and Fergusson, Wool Merchants, 5594, Cheapside.” That’s the city address, I

expect. I've often seen the name over the door in my perambulations. Now for the Brixton one. Here you are again, you see : "William Moray, Esq." (they're all esquires out at Brixton, my dear, nothing under), "The Firs, Godalming Park, Westborough Road, Brixton, S.E." O dear! O dear! isn't it enough to make one laugh. "The Firs" indeed! I wonder how many firs they have about it? They'd much better have called it "The Furs" at once. I bet you'll find nothing but cats in the back garden. However, there's your address, my dear, and if you've got anything large enough to hold it, you'd better write it down at once, before I lose it again. "William Moray, Esq., The Firs, Godalming Park, Westborough Road, Brixton, S.E." Ha! ha! ha! ha!

'But do you really think I can go there?' asks Delia, looking half alarmed at the idea.

‘Go there! of course! What is to prevent you? You’re not afraid of the wool-merchant’s wife, are you? Go there boldly and demand your child, and if you don’t get him, you will at all events get the chance of telling your own story. And mind you this, Delia Moray: cowards like your husband dread nothing more than an outspoken woman who is not afraid to make her wrongs public property. Men generally shut the door before they either kiss a woman or strike her: and if you are to live with James Moray again, your best safeguard against his cruelty will be to tell your friends of it freely.’

‘Yes, Mrs. Horton, you are right,’ replies Delia, animated by her friend’s courageous spirit. ‘I remember now, that the reason James was so angry with me the night before I came away, was because I had plucked up courage to tell his brother he had struck me.’

and when the lodgers were roused by my screams, he shrunk into himself again and seemed quite frightened. I *will* go to Brixton,' she continues, rising and arranging her dress before the mirror, 'and I will tell Mrs. William Moray everything; and if she is a woman with a heart in her bosom, she must pity me for the suffering I have gone through. And if she hasn't a heart, or tries to oppose me, I will take up my boy in my arms and run straight away with him—nothing shall stop me. I will stick a knife into the first person that comes in my way—I will——'

'Stay!' interrupts Mrs. Hephzibah; 'be a little reasonable or I shall not let you go. Courage is a good thing, Delia Moray, but foolhardiness deserves its name. Say what you will—do what you will, but don't forget the *man* has the law on his side.'

'Mrs. Horton, if they try to keep Willie

away from me, I will kill him! No one shall have my child but myself.'

'My dear, you shall do something much better than that! You shall force his father to accept your terms!'

'But you say he has the law on his side.'

'Quite true; but you have a greater power on yours (unless, which I strongly disbelieve, Mr. William Moray intends to charge himself with his brother's future support). He has the law, my dear, but you have the *money*!'



CHAPTER X.

'HE SHALL NEVER TAKE HIM FROM ME!'

As Delia, fortified by her friend's last words, speeds upon her way to Brixton, she feels a different creature. The desire to weep has left her, and she is burning with indignation and the ambition to redress her wrongs instead. Women who cringe, panic-stricken, before a man's ill-treatment of themselves, will become mad devils in their thirst for revenge if he lays a finger on their children. And Delia Moray is ready for anything. Had she a knife concealed in her bosom and

a white cap upon her head, she might stand for a model of Charlotte Corday upon her road to Marat's chamber, as, with desperate eyes and firmly-closed mouth, the Metropolitan Railway rushes with her towards The Firs.

At another moment she would have been terribly nervous of encountering Mrs. William Moray, whom she has always pictured to herself as an exalted personage who holds actresses and all persons who work for their daily bread in very low repute. And as far as the latter clause is concerned, Delia is right. Mrs. William Moray, when she was first raised to fill that proud position, was a stout, ill-bred, vulgar girl, whom William Moray, then a clerk in a counting-house, picked up somewhere in the suburbs of London. Respectable she always was, in the sense in which that word is generally used, and for an excellent reason, because she

was too uninteresting and ill-favoured to render it worth any man's while to try and induce her to be otherwise. To become William Moray's wife was a great rise for Miss Amelia Ellis, as she was then called. The young clerk had several acquaintances in London higher in standing than himself, and they patronised his bride by calling on her, and thereby rendering her too grand to walk about with her own relations.

She was for ever talking at first of the many 'carriage people' she numbered amongst her visitors, and now that she has attained the dignity of being a 'carriage lady' herself, nothing can equal her self-importance and vulgarity. Such a woman as this is just the one to look down (or attempt to do so) upon all professionals, never mind to what position they may have attained in their art, nor whether they belong to Literature, Painting, Music, or the Drama. The greatest

actor that ever lived is classed, in Mrs. William Moray's illiterate estimation, in the same category as the super who brings a letter upon the stage: and the greatest vocalist is in nowise better than one of the chorus. They are all 'play-actors,' in her ideas; low creatures that have to appear before the public in order to pay the weekly bills which she has but to ask 'Willgum' (as she invariably terms Mr. Moray) to draw a cheque for, and therefore must rank in social status infinitely below 'Mrs. Willgum,' who puts on all her H's with a deep inspiration, and does not even know a gentleman when she sees him.

As Delia, after many inquiries and several wrong turnings, arrives at last before the large stucco building standing back from the road, with a carriage-sweep in front of it, on the gates of which are inscribed in bold characters, 'The Firs,' she draws her shawl

more closely around her, and wonders, for the first time, what the William Morays will say to her for seeking their presence uninvited. The thought staggers, but it does not daunt her. Willie may be within those walls, she thinks, as she glances up at the many curtained windows, ornamented with china boxes of winter shrubs; and Willie belongs to her, and nothing shall deter her from doing her utmost to rescue him again from the hands of his cruel father. She enters the drive-gate boldly, and walks up to the hall-door, scanning the house as she goes.

It is Sunday, and there are not many shabbily-dressed people about. Delia fancies she sees the lace curtain at the window of one of the lower rooms move, as though somebody were watching her approach from within; but she marches bravely up the steps, and gives a bold, determined double-knock. A footman answers it, and she asks

for Mrs. Moray. The man examines her inquisitively, as though he were not quite sure to what part of the house he ought to conduct her; but something in her face, combined with the double-knock, decides him, and he ushers her into the drawing-room which is on the same floor.

Delia sees the butler's tray standing in the hall, and hears the rattle of knives and forks as she passes the dining-room. They are at luncheon then, or at dinner. All the better! Her brother-in-law will be at home, and able to establish her identity. When the servant asks for her name, she answers:

‘Tell Mrs. Moray a lady wishes to speak to her on urgent business that will not bear delay;’ and then, seeing indecision in the man's face, she adds: ‘Take in my message, or I shall take it in myself,’ which quickly changes his expression to one of assent, and Delia is left alone.

She does not sit down ; she could not rest a moment in the state of excitement into which she has worked herself. She paces up and down the long room restlessly, wondering in a kind of vague manner what is the use of having a handsomely-furnished room, if all the chairs and sofas are to be kept covered in holland, and the frame of the mirror disfigured by a drapery of cut tissue-paper to keep off the flies.

She has not leisure, however, to take in half the beauties of the apartment. Her ear is straining to catch some sound that shall betoken the presence of her child, and she scarcely sees the classical group of white and silver flowers in a chalk vase that formed the centre ornament of Mrs. William Moray's wedding-cake, and is now disposed under a glass case on a side-table ; nor the woollen mats of many colours, like Joseph's coat, that are placed alike under books, bottles, or

baskets. There is an antimacassar on every chair-back : there is one on a small table that holds an alabaster figure in front of the window : there is one even depending from the music-stool. Yet Delia sees nothing of it all : which proves that when we are in any great suspense or anxiety, the most beautiful works of art may be passed by unheeded.

An interval of five to ten minutes occurs whilst Mrs. William Moray is arranging her laces and ribbons, and wiping the effects of luncheon from her ample bust where the crumbs will settle, and the poor mother in the drawing-room is wondering how much longer she is to be kept in suspense. But then the dining-room door opens and closes, and in another minute the drawing-room door has followed its example, and the lady of the house, arrayed in a plain-coloured satin and velvet dress, enters.

Delia glances at her sister-in-law, and feels her heart sink and her hopes of sympathy vanish. There is nothing in Mrs. Moray's face but hardness and vulgarity. She is a woman of about five-and-thirty, stout and ungraceful, with small eyes, coarse features and limbs, and a complete absence of good breeding. She eyes her unknown visitor curiously. What on earth can this young person, arrayed in a stuff gown and a black straw hat, require of the mistress of the 'Firs,' and on a Sunday too! There must be some mistake. The supposition is marked so strongly on her countenance, that Delia answers it before it is spoken.

'I told your servant to announce me to you simply as a lady, because I was not sure if you knew who I am if you would see me. And I felt that I *must* see you, whatever happened. I am Mrs. James Moray—Willie's mother—and I have come to ask

you what they have done with my boy?’

The elder Mrs. Moray is completely taken aback. It requires a person to be well used to society to encounter a surprise of this sort, and preserve one’s presence of mind. And this is the first intimation she has received that the little boy now under her roof has a mother : her husband having presented him to her as the orphan child of his brother. So she does what most ill-bred people would do under the circumstances : grows very warm and agitated, and sinks down into a chair, without asking her visitor to be seated also.

‘I don’t know in the least what you’re talking about,’ she says, looking Delia steadfastly in the face. ‘There hain’t such a person as Mrs. James Moray—leastways, not connected with our family.’

‘Have they dared to tell you that story

then !' exclaims Delia excitedly ; 'dared to say I am *not* married to him ! O, Mrs. Moray, it is a falsehood !—a wicked, cruel falsehood ! I have my marriage-certificate at home, and can prove to you that I am James's wife. Where is your husband ? He knows me well enough. Let him come and say to my face that I am not his brother's wife.'

'O, that is heasily settled, young woman,' says the other, edging towards the door, and trying not to look uncomfortable ; 'for Mr. James Moray's wife has been dead for hever so long, as I can testify. However, if you wish to see my husband, I think it will be the best for hall parties ; for I am quite hunequal myself to contending with so hextraordinary a hinterruption. And hon the Sabbath too !'

'I am sorry I should have had to disturb you on Sunday ; but how could I be expected

to wait? I am in the greatest distress of mind about my boy. I came home from the theatre last night to find him gone from my lodgings—taken away, stolen, and not a word even to let me know where he is.’

‘You came home from *where*?’ demands Mrs. William Moray, horrified.

‘From the theatre, where I play—the “Corinthian.” I am an actress. I support myself and Willie, and have supported my husband for years past by my own labour. It is hard that the only requital he can make me is to steal my child, and that his brother helps him in the robbery!’

‘Willgum! Willgum!’ calls Mrs. Moray from the open door.

She has drawn her purple satin skirts closer around her as the awful truth of Delia’s profession is made patent to her sensitive understanding, and now she summons her husband at once to her aid. Her ears

must have deceived her. It cannot be true. The mother of the child now sitting at her luncheon-table, and the wife of her husband's brother, an actress ! and actually standing within a few yards of her. If Mrs. Moray were good at fainting, which she is not, she would certainly drop down now. But she grows red as a peony in the face instead, and bawls 'Willgum !' at the top of her voice.

'Tell your master to come here himmediately,' she ejaculates to a passing servant, and in another moment William Moray answers the summons.

Delia's indignation is by this time at its height. She sees how her rights, her very existence, have been ignored by the wool-merchant, and she is ready to expose and defy him in the presence of his wife.

'Have this person turned out of the house at once, Willgum,' exclaims Mrs. Moray, as soon as he appears, 'or I don't remain in

it. She is an himposter—a hactress who hinsists she is Mrs. James Moray, though hI've told her there's no such person in hour family.'

But as Mrs. 'Willgum's' eyes fall upon her husband's face, she is not quite so sure of Delia being an 'himposter.'

'Am I Mrs. James Moray, or am I not?' says that young woman, as she confronts her brother-in-law boldly.

'Really! this is an excessively awkward predicament,' he stammers in reply. 'I must request you to leave the house. I cannot have Mrs. Moray alarmed in this manner. I——'

But Delia is a match for him.

'I will *not* leave the house,' she says defiantly, 'until you answer my question, and give me back my boy. Am I your brother's wife, or am I not?'

'Well—of course—at least James assures

me,' he commences, still utterly at a loss to know how to get out of the dilemma.

'Why, Lor', Mr. Moray!' exclaims his better half, 'do you mean to tell me there's hany doubt upon the matter, when you've hassured me, times hout of number, that your brother his a widower and the boy a horphan?'

'Then he lied to you,' says Delia. 'He knew his brother had a wife. He has spent evening after evening at our rooms, going out with my unfortunate husband, and encouraging him in drinking and other vices. Bad as James may be, this man is much the worse of the two, who could see and know, and join in it all, and then deny it to suit his own convenience.'

'Don't haddress me, if you please, young woman,' says Mrs. 'Willgum,' with her haughtiest air. 'If you hare Mr. James's wife, of which there seems a doubt, you belong to a calling which should have pre-

vented you from hintruding yourself into hany lady's drawing-room. But has for you,' she continues, turning to the unfortunate man who looks very much as if he would like to make his escape, 'I'm surprised hat you ! His she his wife, or his she not ? I demand the question hanswered as well as herself.'

'Well, my dear, if you must have it, she *is* ; but knowing the objection you would naturally feel towards her profession, I thought it best not to let you hear the truth, especially as I have decided to adopt the little boy.'

'Hadopt the little boy !' exclaims Mrs. Moray. 'I'll allow you to do no such a thing. What ! you expect me to hact the part of mother to a hactress's himp ? Never ! The very hidea makes my blood curdle.'

'A mother to my boy !' cries Delia, in her turn. 'I would like to see you or any

woman *dare* to try it. *I* am his mother ! God gave him to me, and I am perfectly able, not only to protect him, but myself. Where is my child ?' she continues fiercely, as she turns upon William Moray ; ' where is my Willie ? Give him back to me, or I'll go straight to the next magistrate and tell him the whole story from beginning to end.'

But at the sound of his mother's voice uttering his name, and raised as though to summon him, little Willie has got down from his chair at the luncheon-table, and now appearing at the drawing-room door, flies, with a cry of pleasure, into Delia's arms.

' My child !' she exclaims, ' my own *own* child ! Let those take heed who would try to tear you from me again.'

' But, under the circumstances, I shall not be justified in permitting you to remove my nephew from my care,' interposes William

Moray nervously. 'His father placed him with me, and unless the law interferes, you have no right to take him away. In fact, I will not let him go !'

'If you don't, I'll turn him hout hon the door-step,' says his wife.

'If you don't, I claim my right to remain by his side till the affair is settled,' says his sister-in-law.

'You shall never stay hin *my* house,' cries Mrs. William to Mrs. James. 'I've never hassociated with hactresses yet, and I ham not habout to begin now, hif I leave my hown house and perish of cold hin the street.'

'And you're not going to have my boy to do as you choose with, not for a single hour, until the law gives him to you, which it never shall. I may be an actress—for which you seem to despise me—but I am a mother, and that I expect you'll never be, live as long as you may.'

There is nothing insults a barren woman more than to taunt her with the want of children. At this moment, if Mrs. William Moray might or could tear Delia into little pieces, she would do it with the greatest pleasure. But all she can do is to scream at her husband.

‘Take her haway ! take her hout hof the house, or there’s no saying what I may feel hinclined to do. You have basely deceived me, Willgum ; first by denying the hexistence of this creature, and then by bringing her low hacting brat into a respectable house, as hif ’twas your hexpress hintention to cut me hof from hall society of hany mark whatever. I’m surprised at you, and deeply hoffended by hall that has passed.’

‘And not content with deceiving your wife and abetting your brother in all his cruelty to me, you stoop to help him to steal back my boy—my poor boy whom you

know how he beat and illused, and whom I was trying to hide only from his barbarity.'

William Moray is like a man between two fires. He really is to be pitied the most of the three. He does not know which of these women to conciliate first, nor on what tack to steer so as to make his peace with either.

'I took the child from your lodgings with the best intentions,' he says to Delia. 'You cannot bear the whole burden of his support in case of anything happening to my brother, and it was my intention to help you by adopting Willie as my son.'

'You shall never have him,' she cries indignantly.

'No! I'll hanswer for that,' interposes his wife. 'A fine thing hindeed, to have to rear a child has his not your own, and has a mother you hare hashamed to be seen halong hof.'

‘Don’t insult me any further, or I shall tell you what I think of *you*,’ retorts Delia, with Willie, frightened by the clamour, clinging closely to her breast. Having said which, she turns away as though to leave the room.

‘Where are you going?’ demands William Moray.

‘What is that to you? Stand aside, and let me pass.’

‘If you intend to leave the house, I shall go with you.’

‘Willgum! hif you hattempts to follow that young person, you may go for good and hali, for I’ll get a separation from you as sure as my name’s Amelia Moray. No one has consorts with play-hactors and hactresses shall defile my company hafterwards.’

‘But, my dear, I promised my brother—’ he has commenced to say, when the drawing-room door is thrown open again.

‘Mr. James Moray his coming hup the havenue,’ announces Jeames Plush hastily.

It is evident that Mr. James Moray is no welcome visitor at the Firs, since the servants have been ordered to give warning of his approach. But his presence at this particular moment is a real relief to his brother, who gives a ready order for his admittance. At the intelligence of her husband’s presence, Delia turns very pale, and clasps the boy tighter to her bosom. But she does not quail nevertheless.

‘That low creature here hagain,’ ejaculates Mrs. Moray, ‘with his drunken habits and his hunpleasant cunning countenance. Well, there’s a nice pair of you, and that’s my hopinion, and hif I’d known hit would come to this, I never would have demeaned myself by hentering such a family—no, never!’

‘Whatever you may think, be good enough to keep it to yourself for the present,’ replies

her husband. 'My brother's coming is most opportune. It relieves my mind of a great responsibility. He can now do what he thinks best with his own child.'

'He shall never take him from me again,' says Delia, as she holds the boy close—close against her throbbing heart, and nerves herself for the coming interview.



CHAPTER XI.

‘IF SHE WERE ONLY OUT OF THE WAY.’

OF the three people who await James Moray’s advent in the drawing-room, perhaps his brother feels the most uncomfortable. He knows that when the business is over, and the husband and wife have departed with their boy, he will have a terrible account to settle with his Amelia. Never dreaming that Delia would have the hardihood to thrust herself into her sister-in-law’s presence, he has prevaricated concerning the whole family without scruple. He has represented

his brother as a poor young widower in a rapid consumption, his disease aggravated by his habits, who is unable to provide for his child after his death, and will soon be powerless to trouble them any more. Willie has naturally mentioned his mother several times in his aunt's hearing, but her husband has put her off the scent by declaring the boy alludes to some female who reared him, and whom he addresses by that name. He has assured her again and again that if she will consent to let him adopt his nephew, they will be able to bring him up as their own son without interference from any one. And now, as soon as they are alone again, he will have to bear the brunt of her reproaches for his deception and treachery.

The other brother does not feel much happier. He enters the drawing-room at the Firs with anything but an assured countenance. He is perfectly sober, but not

at all certain of the reception he will get at his sister-in-law's hands. For the fact is, he has only entered the house twice before this—once when his brother introduced Willie to the notice of his wife, and again when the child was hastily conveyed from the lodgings at Holloway to Brixton, and some false excuse was made for taking him there at that time of night. And on neither occasion was Mrs. William Moray's manner towards her brother-in-law such as to encourage a speedy repetition of his visit. But the old rooms in the city have been particularly dull to-day, and he feels more than usually weak and ill. So he has thought to make Willie's presence at the Firs an excuse for inquiring after the child, in hopes his brother may ask him to stop and take his Sunday dinner with them. Little does he think whom he will encounter in Mrs. William Moray's drawing-room. As he enters at the door, he makes

his way at once up to her. He looks very pale and thin and somewhat shabby, but he has the appearance of a gentleman, though the woman he addresses cannot perceive it. He holds out his hand to her almost deprecatingly. She rejects it coarsely.

‘Don’t hoffer your hand to me, hif you please, Mr. James, for I have found hout hall your deception for myself.’

‘What does it mean?’ he asks, turning to his brother, and in turning he sees his wife and child. Then there is no need of explanation. ‘So *you* are at the bottom of this, are you?’ he says angrily. ‘I might have guessed as much. What do you mean by coming up here without my leave? How dare you intrude yourself upon my relations in this way?’

‘I came here for my boy,’ she answers boldly, ‘and if you had placed him in Buckingham Palace, I would have forced

myself into the very presence of royalty in order to get him back again.'

'I am whipped if you shall keep him, though!' exclaims her husband, as he makes a feint of wresting the child from her grasp. 'The boy is mine, and I shall do exactly as I choose with him. The law is on my side—I have ascertained so much—and you have no power whatever to interfere with it. I shall put the boy where I choose, and with whom I choose, and no one on earth shall say me "nay."'

'You'll not leave him here, Mr. James, not for hanother hour, for I refuse to keep him,' interposes Mrs. William Moray. 'Hit was never represented to me, when I consented to hallow the child to remain hunder my roof, that he was the hoffspring hof a hactress.'

The start of surprise and disappointment with which James Moray receives this

announcement is not lost upon sharp-sighted Delia. She reads its motive at a glance, and takes advantage of it. If Willie is discarded by his aunt, the burden not only of the child's support, but his own, must fall upon her husband. She remembers Mrs. Hephzibah's last words, and throws down her next card boldly.

'Take your son, then,' she says, in a loud voice but with trembling lips, as she pushes Willie towards his father. 'If you are to have the sole disposal of him, so must you take the sole responsibility. I will go out into the world alone and support myself.'

But this unexpected move upon the mother's part startles William Moray. He advised the recapture of the boy solely to compel Delia to follow him. If she is driven too far, and deliberately deserts her child, the support of both brother and nephew will come upon himself. And he is not prepared

to undertake it. Therefore he quickly interposes to check the angry rejoinder that he sees upon James's lips.

‘Stop, James! pray stop! You are going too far! What has your wife done that you should threaten her with the loss of her child? She has always been a good mother, and she will continue to be so, I am sure. This matter only requires a little settlement. Cannot we talk it over together and come to some amicable arrangement?’

‘O, all right,’ says James Moray, mystified by the other's change of tactics, ‘but I thought you said——’

‘Never mind what I said. We were both put out at the time by finding Mrs. Moray had deserted you. But now that she has come back, we must try to patch up this little disagreement. What is it, Mrs. Moray, that you require my brother to do for you?’

‘Simply this:—To treat me decently!

To let me lie down and get up in peace, and retain possession of my own child. I want no love from him. I have ceased to expect it for years past, but if he will only promise to refrain from striking me and Willie, and to leave us together, I will work for him, as I have done, until I can work no more !

‘Well, I think that is a perfectly fair proposal, and one to which my brother should be pleased to assent. What do you say, James? Have you any further remark to make upon the subject?’

‘Does she mean to come home with me and do her duty?’ demands James in a sullen voice.

‘I have already said I will. But I don’t consider it my duty to submit to be treated like a dog rather than a woman. I can support myself, and you can’t. I am willing to support you on certain conditions, but the next time you force me to leave you, I shall

go, not to Holloway, but straight into a police-court, and see if I cannot get satisfaction from the law. I have borne it all in silence too long, but I will bear it no more. Understand me plainly, James! I know my own power and I mean to use it. You may have the law on your side, but I have the money on mine; and if you can support yourself and the child by your share of the business, I will take care to support myself by mine.'

'Who's been putting you up to all this nonsense?' growls her husband.

'It is not nonsense, and you know it! Now, you can choose what you will do.'

Willie is standing by her side, and looking up plaintively into her face the while; but she dare not meet the glance she loves so well, for fear it should overcome her. She is playing a dangerous game, for him and for herself, but she knows it is her only chance

of retaining the boy, and feels as desperate as the gambler who has staked his all.

Her husband does not answer her at once. He is trying to find out from the expression of his brother's countenance, what he intends to do in the matter. But William will not give him any clue, though his sister-in-law does.

‘Willgum!’ she cries sharply, ‘hif your brother hintends to be hall day making hup his mind hupon the subject, I request you will take him hout of doors. Hit’s a hinfamous and disgraceful transaction from beginning to hend—that’s what I call it—and the sooner the whole party is taken to the police-court, I should say the better.’

‘My dear! if you will only have a little patience,’ interposes William Moray.

‘Do you hear what that woman says?’ demands Delia of her husband. ‘Will your pride permit you to remain here after that?’

We have sunk low, Heaven knows, but there is a stage lower for us to fall yet, and that is to be subjected to her insolence for another moment.'

'O! the himpudence of the creature!' exclaims Mrs. 'Willyum,' 'when you and your drunken, lying husband, and that himp of a boy, hare defiling the very carpets hunder hour feet!'

This appears too much even for the unsensitive nerves of James Moray. He turns to his wife, and says hastily,

'Shall we settle this matter on our way back or no?'

'You can settle it now, if you choose,' she answers. 'Peace or war! Take your choice between them; I have no other terms to propose to you.'

'Let it be peace, James,' whispers his brother; 'it is the best policy, at all events for the present.'

‘We will have peace, then,’ says James Moray, as he holds out his hand to Delia.

Their hands meet, but there is no life in the clasp that unites them.

‘It is the wisest choice for all parties,’ replies Delia gravely. ‘Come, then, let us return home. We have been insulted sufficiently for to-day.’

Leading her boy by one hand, she follows her husband from the room, without bestowing another glance upon the irate Mrs. ‘Willgum.’

‘Hinsulted, hindeed!’ they hear her harsh voice call after them into the passage; ‘I should like to know who has been most hinsulted, myself or that creature that play-hacts night after night in a low theatre. Hinsulted, hindeed! I feels myself hinsulted by hever having been hasked to set heyesh upon such trumpery! Here, Willgum!’

But ‘Willgum’ has escaped as a bird from

the net of the fowler, and is showing his visitors out at the hall-door.

‘I shall look in at your place this evening or to-morrow, James,’ he says at parting. ‘I want to talk this matter over quietly with you, and to persuade Mrs. Moray, if I can, that it was with a view to the good of both that I recommended you to claim the boy.’

‘It is quite unnecessary that you should try to persuade me of anything,’ replies Delia. ‘You have heard my determination, and nothing will alter it. The future lies between James and myself, and no third party will be able to interfere between us again.’

‘I suppose I am to understand from that speech that my presence is not welcome to you, Mrs. Moray.’

‘Oh yes, it is!’ interposes his brother hastily. ‘Come round, William, by all

manner of means; I have several matters upon which I wish to consult you.'

The James Morays return to their uncomfortable home almost in silence. Delia sits in one corner of the third-class railway carriage, with Willie held tightly in her arms, and her eyes fixed apparently on space. But as her husband glances furtively at her, every now and then, he perceives by the stern expression of her mouth and the calm gravity of her countenance that she is perfectly determined and fearless.

And indeed it is true, that having proved her power over him, the woman's dread of his brutality has vanished. All she feared was losing her child or seeing him ill-treated; but she is conscious now that she has gained the victory, and she means to keep it. Her husband is conscious of the same fact, and it does not tend to give him a better temper. His bullying tone has departed,

but he is very sulky ; and when they quit the train, he leads the way home to their old apartments in silence.

Little Willie, clinging to his mother's hand, chatters of the places and people that they pass, and she answers him cheerfully ; but the husband and father does not speak to either of them. As Mrs. Timson answers the door, and perceives who they are who stand upon the step, she throws up her hands in amazement.

'Eart alive ! dearie ; you 'aven't never come back for good, surely !'

'I hope it may be so, Mrs. Timson, but I'm not sure,' replies Delia ; and in her answer James Moray reads further sign that his wife intends to hold her future in her own hands. They reach the sitting-room, and here Delia has a consultation with Mrs. Timson on the best means of making themselves comfortable for the night ; for, as it is

Sunday, she has determined not to fetch her things away from Holloway until the following day.

There is nothing to eat in the house, and neither James nor she has dined. She orders something to be prepared for them as soon as possible ; and Willie is delighted to be allowed to walk round with Mrs. Timson to the butcher's, and try and persuade him to cut a steak on Sunday.

As they leave the room Delia looks at her husband, who has sunk into a chair, and is leaning his elbows on the table, with his head in his hands. He appears abject, and his condition moves her to pity. She goes up to him and speaks kindly :

‘There is a good fire now, James. Come nearer to it and warm yourself. I am sure you must be cold. I think this is the coldest day we have had yet.’

But all the answer she gets is an order to

leave him alone. She goes on as though he had not spoken.

‘I feel for you, James, very much—though you may not believe it—and the unpleasant position you have placed yourself in; but you made it imperatively necessary for the safety of both Willie and myself, that I should take some decided steps in the matter. Women and children are not animals that you can kick or ill-use at your pleasure; and you are not the first man that has had to learn that lesson.’

‘Will you stop your cursed preaching?’

‘No; I think it is best whilst we are on the subject that you should hear all I have to say to you. I shall not allude to it again, unless you compel me. You understood me perfectly when I spoke to you in your brother’s house, just now, did you not?’

‘Perfectly. You think you’ve got the whipland over me, and— —’

'I mean to keep it!' interposes Delia in a contained voice. 'I should not have called it the "whiphand" myself; but I suppose that term will do as well as any other; and the time is past, James, for compliments between you and me. You heard the conditions on which I consented to return home and work for you; but I did not enter into details. I hope you understand them. I will not have my child struck, or——'

'Oh, you won't! won't you!' says Moray, with a sneer.

'Or shut up in the dark,' continues his wife calmly, 'or unnecessarily punished in any way. Nor will I submit to insults myself. If you want to call me names, or strike me, or thrust me out upon the landing, you must pay for it; for I will not. Otherwise I see no reason why we should not live peaceably together. Love'—here poor Delia's voice shakes a little—'love has been long

dead between us ; but so long as I can make my two or three pounds a week, there will always be a roof over your head, and a meal upon the table for you ; and you know you will be welcome to share all that I may be able to provide.'

'You mean, in fact, to take advantage of a poor devil like myself being out of sorts and unable to work, to dole out my food to me when I am good, and withhold it when I am naughty, as though I were a child like your whining brat there, instead of a man !'

His allusion to his illness excites her womanly compassion. She flies to him as though his words had melted away all memory of the cruel past, and folds her arms about his wasted body and lays her cheek upon his arm.

'No, no, Jemmy ! don't say that ! I am your wife, and all that I have is yours. It is my duty as well as my pleasure to work

for you ; only be good to me, dear, as you used to be in the days when we were first married, and I shall forget all the rest.'

But he pushes her from him with an oath.

'Be off with your hypocritical whining ! It's too late to come over me with any gammon of that sort. You've lowered me before my brother and his wife, and spoilt every chance I had of getting any good out of them ; and now you come fawning over me, and asking me to behave as I used to do in the days when I thought you cared for me. Why, I hate the very sight of you ! If you want the truth, you've got it.'

Delia draws herself up, and leaves his side without another word. That moment might have been a turning-point in both their lives ; but it has passed, and will never be recalled. Her face is pale but very resolute, as she leaves his presence to go and look after her child. Not another word is said upon the

subject that divides them ; but ~~she~~ reminds him of it every hour of the day.

The dinner appears and disappears. The husband and wife sit down together, and eat at the same table ; but they do not address each other, except in the most formal manner. But the boy is present, and talks for both of them. Once Moray harshly bids him hold his tongue in the old fashion ; Delia does not resent the order, but she just raises her eyes, and regards him steadily in the face. It is sufficient. In that determined glance he reads a reminder of their agreement, and Willie is permitted to chatter on unrebuked.

But the hatred with which Moray has commenced to regard his wife waxes stronger with each proof of her power. He is in the position of a madman bound with fetters, from which there is no possibility of freeing himself, lashing out in impotent fury, and

foaming with rage because he cannot reach the passers-by. He would like to murder Delia. Those cunning, pale blue eyes of his have a dangerous light in them as he watches her every action. But she takes no notice of his mood, believing that it is but the natural consequence of the unpleasant scenes they have gone through, and that it will cure itself with time and reflection. She is perfectly fearless of him.

When dinner is concluded, he looks in the cupboard for brandy, and finds none. He finished his bottle the day before. He feels in his pockets. They are devoid of coin. Then he calls out, as he used to do of old, for his wife, and tells her to send out for some.

‘What is it² you want?’ she demands, coming in from the next room.

‘A bottle of brandy. Tell Timson to fetch it.’

.

‘Have you the money to pay for it?’

‘No.’

‘Neither have I.’

‘What do you mean? Didn’t “the ghost walk” on Friday as usual?’

‘Certainly; but I have no money to spare for brandy. I never mean to buy another drop of it.’

‘But I can’t live without it!’

‘You *must* live without it, James. Our child has had to live without socks, or flannels, or boots—often without meat or milk; and all that you might have brandy to help you into the grave! I have been a foolish and a wicked woman to encourage you in it so long; but it is over now. When I said I would work to get you board and lodging, I didn’t include brandy in the contract.’

‘Curse you!’ is all he answers.

But she turns away without further re-

mark, and the dull afternoon drags itself along, whilst he sits ruminating on the sorry prospect before him.

With the evening comes, according to promise, his brother William. Delia has retired to bed : in the first place, because she is very weary ; in the second, because she has no wish to encounter her brother-in-law.

‘Any news?’ he says as he enters the room.

‘News!’ repeats James contemptuously ; ‘it’s just as I told you it would be if I forced Delia to return home on account of the boy. She’s never ceased bullying me since we left your house. She will have this, and she won’t have the other, till I’m sick of it already. I can’t speak to the child, but she snaps me up ; and she’s refused to let me have even a few shillings for liquor. My life won’t be worth a curse at this rate.’

‘She’s turned the tables on you, has she?’

Well, I suppose that was almost to be expected, wasn't it, when she found the game in her own hands? But I say, Jem, you mustn't worry over it like this, old fellow! You're in a regular fever, and shaking all over. I hope you're not going to be ill.'

'A drop of brandy would set me all right,' replies the drunkard, who is, in fact, trembling as if he were in an ague-fit, 'only I've no money to send out for it.'

'I'll manage that for you,' says William, as he rings the bell and directs the landlady to fetch the stimulant. 'It doesn't do to leave off your liquor all at once, though Mrs. Moray is quite right to try and restrain you. You mustn't kill yourself before your time, you know. Where is your wife?'

'In bed,' says the other, with an expletive.

'Ah, all the better. I've come to talk to you to-night, and don't want any listeners.

Here's the brandy. Take a good stiff glass, Jem, and try to stop that fit of trembling, for Heaven's sake.'

Jem is only too ready to obey his brother's orders, and in a very short space of time, by reason of the poison he pours into his system, he has apparently recovered both his nerves and his spirits, and is ready for business.

The conversation which ensues between the brothers relates solely to the little boy, whom William, notwithstanding the opposition he is likely to encounter from his wife, has taken a great fancy to adopt. He wants to persuade James to make a will, appointing him sole guardian to the child, subject to no control whatever of the mother: in the event of which he promises to make little Willie his heir, and bring him up to the profitable business of a wool-merchant.

'And so I will — byme-by — byme-

by——’ asseverates Jemmy, who is beginning to be slightly incoherent under the influence of the brandy.

‘Better do it at once,’ urges his brother. ‘There is no time like the present; and after the way in which your wife has behaved to you, there is no knowing what she may do next. Besides, I think the fact of your having made such a will, will be a weapon in your hands against her. It will vex her, you know, terribly; yet she has no earthly power to prevent it.’

‘Ah! true—true!’ reiterates James, the pleasure of revenge sparkling in his eye. ‘Give me the paper—quick—and let me write it down; it’ll vexsh her—true, and she shall be vexsht, she shall—cursh her!’

‘I was sure you would see it in its proper light,’ resumes William Moray, ‘and so I drew up a paper that will answer all the purpose, if you will just write your name at

the bottom—here. Stop, though! we must have a witness. Will your landlady officiate, do you think?

‘Dunno—shure!’ says James.

‘Well, we can but try,’ replies William, ringing the bell.

When the landlady answers it, he meets her on the threshold.

‘Mrs. Timson, will you oblige us by witnessing my brother’s signature? (I have been inducing him to make a proper provision for Mrs. Moray in case of his death,’ he adds in a lower tone, ‘and really his health appears to be breaking up so fast, that I think the sooner it is all settled the better.’)

‘With pleasure, sir!’ replies Mrs. Timson, who considers the request to be quite a compliment, ‘and I’m sure she deserves all he can do for ’er, for a worse ’usband never existed, as I can testify to, and all my lodgers.’

‘Yes, yes! but I think we must let bygones be bygones—just for the present at all events. Now, James! Let us see your signature. Mrs. Timson is all ready to witness it!’

‘All rightsh—where’m I putsh it?’ ejaculates his brother, starting up in his chair.

‘Bless my soul! ’e’s as drunk as a lord already!’ remarks the landlady, ‘it’s as much as ever ’e’ll do to ’old ’is pen.’

However, he does just manage to sign his name legibly, and when his brother’s and Mrs. Timson’s autographs have been added to it, the ceremony is complete. Then the landlady retires, and James Moray applies himself afresh to the brandy bottle.

‘I don’t think you had better drink any more to-night, Jem,’ says William, as he buttons up the paper that has just been signed in his breast-pocket. ‘Why not go to bed and sleep? You’ll be another man to-morrow morning.’

‘Too weak to—to—sh—shleep,’ replies James, as he tosses off the liquor. ‘Shee how handsh sh—shakes. All hersh doing—cursh her!’

‘Well, I’m afraid I can’t stay any longer,’ rejoins the other cheerfully. ‘I got into awful hot water with my wife this morning, and shall make matters worse if I stay out late to-night. She was terribly upset by the discovery of Mrs. Moray’s profession, Jem. It was very indiscreet of her to disclose it. And I know the sole chance of my being able to befriend your little boy in case of—in case of—you know what, is, that he is totally separated from his mother. It is a pity Mrs. Moray cannot get some more respectable employment. If she had been a dressmaker or a laundress, it would have jarred less upon Amelia’s nerves. She is very sensitive.’

But James Moray makes no reply to this

harangue. He is leaning forward on the table again, staring into vacancy.

‘It won’t be long before you’ll have played out your little game, and I shall be able to claim the boy as my own,’ thinks his brother as he makes his way downstairs with the paper securely fastened in his breast.

Strange to say, the thought gives him the greatest pleasure. He does not love the child, but he covets him.

He would give all he is worth to have a son of his own, but as that seems impossible, he would like to buy his nephew outright, and never let him hear the name of his parents again. To attain this end, he is capable of braving even his Amelia’s vituperation. After all he thinks it will be but a matter of a few days’ railing, and the martyrdom will secure him an interest in life for the future. So, as he makes his way back to Brixton, he hugs the drunkard’s signature to

his breast as though it were a possession of priceless worth.

James meanwhile, with the brandy bottle still close at his elbow, sits and ruminates over the events of the past day. He is not quite certain to what he has committed himself by placing his signature to that paper, but he remembers it was something to 'vex' his wife, and that idea alone is sufficient to give him pleasure. He would like to do a great deal more than 'vex' her. As sitting alone with his own evil thoughts, and his worst enemy within reach of him, he reviews his misspent life, his drunken brain so distorts the circumstances of it, that he comes at last to persuade himself that Delia has been at the bottom of all the misfortunes that have befallen him. He forgets her patience and long-suffering, and the cruel wrong he did her by making her his wife, and remembers only that she is an actress,

looked down upon and despised, and that his sister-in-law (who might have been so valuable a friend to him) considers herself insulted even by her presence.

As his poor maudlin senses try to unravel the mystery of his existence, it seems to him as though the woman sleeping in the next room were the sole cause that his life has been unfortunate and full of crime. If he had married as William has done, or not married at all—what good luck might not have been his portion! Delia is his evil genius—the marplot that has ruined all his prospects—the bar to any hope for the future. If she were gone, if she would only consent to remain away, and leave him and the child in peace together, William might be persuaded to do for him what he has promised to do for the boy. But she refuses to part with Willie. She says she will stay by him to the last—that no one shall take him

from her. And she has them both in her power, for while she remains, neither his brother nor sister-in-law will admit them to their presence.

If she were only gone now—out of the way—unable to trouble him any more?

The wicked thought presses on the burning brain, more than ordinarily confused by the approach of illness, until it gains the ascendancy, and that which appeared an impossibility ten minutes before, seems the easiest thing in creation now. If he only had a knife—a sharp good knife that he could trust—she is sleeping soundly, and it would be over before she could awake.

The man rises, and gropes his way in drunken blindness to the cupboard, whence he draws an ordinary dinner knife and regards it stupidly. It is dreadful after that to see him kneel down by the fireplace and sharpen the blade upon the hearthstone,

drawing it deliberately backwards and forwards, whilst a malicious smile plays about his countenance.

Then he tries the instrument upon his own finger, and drawing blood with the action, laughs softly to himself, and having opened the door stealthily, makes his way into the next room.



CHAPTER XII.

‘ I WAS NEVER MARRIED TO HIM.’

DELIA is sleeping soundly. The varied emotions she has passed through that day, and the sleepless watch she kept up the night before, induce deep slumber. Her heart is heavy, but she believes she knows the worst now, and is prepared to meet it. So, that suspense ended, she can sleep, however sorrowful the waking may prove to be. There is a small night-light burning in her room. As James Moray enters, he walks up to, and extinguishes it. She does not hear his step.

Nothing disturbs her rest, until she feels the pressure of a hand upon her body, outside the bed-clothes, as it is feeling its way up to her throat.

She stirs—the hand is still. She asks : ‘Is any one there?’ There is no answer.

She believes herself to have been mistaken—it was mere fancy; the fragment of a dream perhaps, which she is not sufficiently aroused to remember. So she composes herself to sleep again. A moment’s pause—and the hand commences once more its upward journey !

Then Delia perceives that the night-light is extinguished, and becomes alarmed.

‘Who are you?’ she demands sharply, as she springs up in bed.

The only answer she receives is the falling of a heavy body against her in the dark, whilst a hand grasps her arm and something sharp and cold is drawn across her unpro-

tected shoulder. In an instant the truth flashes upon her mind—that her husband is attempting her life. She has heard him rave so often, and say that he would kill her, has even known him lock the door and produce a pistol with the same threat on his lips, that she is at no loss to understand who her cowardly assassin is.

With a scream for help that rouses half the household, she wrestles with the arms that attempt, inefficiently, to hold her down ; then leaping from the bed, makes for the door, and throws it open, letting the full light from the gas upon the landing stream into the room.

There he stands—a detected criminal—shivering like a wretch upon the brink of the gallows, with the knife still in his hand. Mrs. Timson, clad in a mysterious brown garment which she always dons in cases of emergency, has come up the stairs to inquire.

what the disturbance is about; the female clothed in flannel and brown paper once more hangs over the banisters of the top landing; and Green, Thompson, and Co. have opened their bedroom doors to listen if their services are required.

‘Lor’! my dear, whatever is the matter now?’ demands the sympathetic landlady.

Delia is about to denounce him—she is about to show the wound upon her shoulder, and let all the house know how just her estimate of the character of this man who calls her ‘wife’ has been, when her attention and thoughts of the danger she has escaped are distracted by the appearance of James Moray himself.

The landlady bears a flaring candle in her hand, and as the light falls full upon the drunkard’s face, both the women start back with horror and surprise. He stands where Delia saw him last, but now the knife has

fallen from his grasp, and he is shaking violently from head to foot. His countenance, usually so pale, has assumed a dark purple tinge, and works violently, his eyes protrude, and the foam is bubbling round his lips.

‘Eaven alive! ’e’s gone mad!’ screams Mrs. Timson.

‘James! James! speak, for mercy’s sake!’ exclaims his wife. ‘I forgive everything—I will be silent as the grave—I——’

But before she can conclude her sentence, the wretched man, after one or two ineffectual efforts to retain his position, falls forward with a gurgle and a groan upon the floor, and is writhing in a fit at her feet. Delia is beside him in a moment, loosening his cravat and necktie—sponging his head with cold water—and trying to restrain him from hurting himself as he struggles against the overwhelming power that is pressing on his

brain. It is the first time she has ever seen any one in a fit, but she might have been accustomed to them all her life, by the presence of mind and helpfulness she displays, whilst Mrs. Timson can do nothing better than give vent to a succession of screams that wake Willie in a paroxysm of terror, and bring all the other lodgers trooping into the room.

‘Ah! I thought ’twould come to this, ma’am,’ says Green reflectively, as he watches the struggling unconscious body on the floor. ‘A man can’t go on for ever as he’s been doing, and not suffer for it in the end. My own brother went off just so, he did, so it seems to come quite natural to me to see it. If you could get a spoon in his mouth now, it might be a comfort to him by-and-by. He’ll have fine work with his tongue when he comes-to. He’s a biting it right through.’

She hears these remarks and many others

similar to them, mingled with Willie's frightened weeping, but she takes no notice of it all. Something—she cannot tell what—seems to warn her that this is the end, and there will be no 'coming-to' ever again for the wretched creature in her lap.

And so the event proves. In a few minutes the convulsion abates—only, it would seem, to allow the body to gain strength to meet the much worse attack that immediately succeeds it, and after which James Moray, with his shirt-front covered with blood and foam, lies quiet and struggles no more.

'He's a coming-to,' remarks Green oracularly.

'He is *dead*!' says Delia in a low voice; and she is right.

When the doctor, who has been summoned by some of the lodgers to his aid, arrives upon the spot, he confirms her verdict. The drunkard has been overtaken by the

fate he was attempting to compass for another.

* * * * *

On the following morning, Mrs. Hephzibah Horton is seated in her own rooms at breakfast in company with the solicitor, Mr. Bond. Not that Mrs. Hephzibah is in the habit of taking breakfast, or any other meal, with a gentleman alone.

Notwithstanding her age, and perfect indifference to what the world may choose to say of her actions, she has never been accused of such an indiscretion before. Partly because she cares too little for the society of men, or they for hers—but chiefly because she knows that though a woman is never young enough, nor pretty enough, to suit the fancy of her own sex, she is never too old nor too ugly to become a mark for their scandal.

But Mr. Bond has invited himself to her breakfast-table this morning. The interview

which she held yesterday with Delia Moray, considerably upset Mrs. Hephzibah's equanimity. She is really attached to the unfortunate little actress, and most interested in all that befalls her. And when Delia left her in that excited manner to go and seek her boy at Brixton, Mrs. Horton, after a short time given to reflection, donned her own walking-things, and started off in the opposite direction for Hampstead, in order to lay the whole case once more before her solicitor, and ask him to tell her plainly how to move in the matter. She made sure that she should find Mr. Bond in the ruralised home, where he almost invariably spends Sundays with his boys and his garden and his poultry. But when she arrived there, she found he had gone out with both his sons for the day, and the maid left in charge of the house had no idea where they had gone, nor when they would return.

So Mrs. Hephzibah, chilled and out of temper, had no alternative but to go home again, and write a long and abusive letter to Mr. Bond. Which epistle, combined with the servant's description of the lady's visible annoyance at missing him, so worked on the little solicitor's feelings, that he started off by an earlier train than usual on Monday morning, and presented himself at Mrs. Horton's rooms in the Strand just as she had sat down to a very cosy-looking breakfast-table.

Though it did not appear at first as if the sacrifice he had made to friendship were to meet with its due reward.

'Who on earth asked you to come poking your nose here at this time in the morning?' Mrs. Hephzibah inquires sharply, as he is announced. 'O! it's no use standing bowing and scraping out there by the door. As you *are* here, you may as well make yourself

comfortable, for I dare say that prinked-up maid of yours, with her fly-away cap and blue ribbons, never takes the trouble to make you a decent cup of tea before you leave home in the mornings. So, if you're not afraid of your character, I'll risk mine, in order that you shan't say you missed your breakfast to see me, and I sent you to Holborn without any.'

Mr. Bond rubs his hands and deprecates the trouble to which he is about to put her, but Mrs. Hephzibah thrusts him down into a chair in front of the fire by placing her hands upon his shoulders, and then proceeds to do the hospitalities of her breakfast-table in a manner so feminine, and opposite to what one would expect from her quick speech and understanding, that the solicitor, in the midst of enjoying his *rissoles* and buttered toast, finds himself wishing he had some such guardian of the Hampstead house-

hold to look after his comforts when he is off duty.

‘And so the poor lady you spoke to me of the other day is in trouble again?’ he remarks, as they commence their meal.

‘Trouble *again!*’ echoes Mrs. Hephzibah, ‘it’s the same trouble, poor dear! and she seems to have had nothing else during the whole course of her married life. But eat your breakfast whilst it’s hot, Mr. Bond, and leave discussion till afterwards. It’s one of my principles never to combine business and eating. You can’t do both well at the same time. And each one is so dependent on the other, that they’re worth attending to separately.’

Mr. Bond laughs, and follows his hostess’s advice, and the meal is prolonged beyond its usual time. Before it is concluded, a servant brings a twisted piece of paper to present to Mrs. Horton.

‘Please, ma’am, a gentleman has brought this for you.’

‘A gentleman?’ repeats Mrs. Horton, as she examines the crumpled note. ‘Now, is he a gentleman, Sarah, or is he not? It’s the most extraordinary thing,’ she continues, turning to her guest, ‘every servant who enters this house I try to teach to distinguish between the appearance of a gentleman and a tradesman, but they can’t do it. The grocer’s lad and the printer’s devil continue to be announced as “young gentlemen;” and it is all the same to Sarah, if *you* knock at the door, or the man who heels my boots calls to have his bill settled, “a gentleman” wants to see me. That’s the truth, now?’ she says, addressing the maid again.

‘Well, ma’am,’ replies Sarah, blushing, ‘*this* gentleman is not, perhaps, *quite* a gentleman, but he’s run very fast with the

note, and he says it's very particular and must be given to you immediate.'

'That's another thing,' says Mrs. Hephzibah, as she untwists the written communication.

But as soon as her eye falls upon its contents, she starts, ejaculates 'Good gracious!' and then with the demand — 'Where is the man?' she flings the note across the table to Mr. Bond, and flies downstairs, followed by the astonished servant.

The solicitor, left alone with the mysterious message, wonders at first if he will be justified in perusing it; but then, remembering the energy with which it was hurled towards him, concludes he will be, and reads as follows :

'DEAR FRIEND,

'If you can come to me, pray do so.

It is all over. He died last night, and I am left alone, and more in need of help from your strong heart and head than ever.

‘Yours affectionately,

‘DELIA MORAY.’

He has hardly had time to decipher the pencilled characters, so as to be sure there is no mistake, before Mrs. Hephzibah returns and throws herself into her chair with a sigh of relief.

‘It’s all right,’ she says, in answer to his look of inquiry. ‘I couldn’t believe it was true till I had questioned the man myself—poor Sarah’s “gentleman!”—a dirty creature who looks as if he hadn’t shaved for a week, nor washed for a twelvemonth! But there’s no doubt about it. The man’s dead, and that poor girl is freed from her worst difficulty. The Lord be praised for all His mercies!’

‘Isn’t that rather a — a — *strong* way of looking at it?’ says the solicitor timidly.

‘Not a bit of it! *No* way could be too strong. The man’s been a curse to her from the day she first set eyes on him, and God has mercifully removed the curse, and saved her perhaps from the temptation of carving out a future for herself. If Delia Moray doesn’t thank Him for her release, she’s not the woman I’ve taken her for—and I’ve done with her henceforward—that’s all!’

‘Still, death, you know, my dear madam, is a very serious thing.’

‘Who said it wasn’t? Though it’s not half so serious as life, which we think nothing of making a jest of! Look at the lives that you and your trade have ruined! You can laugh over them; but if death is mentioned in your presence, even though it’s an escape for the one gone, and a relief for those left,

you think it necessary to pull a long face. I hate such humbug! There's more nonsense talked about death than about anything else on earth. We hear of two armies demolishing each other, and we only say "How dreadful!" We see a worthless drunkard, like this man, Moray stretched ready for the grave, and we walk about on tiptoe and speak with bated breath. Why? To honour the shell of a spirit that excited nothing but loathing whilst it existed here below? Not a bit of it! To gratify our own dread of that which we know must happen sooner or later to ourselves. Bah! Don't talk to me!

Mr. Bond has no intention of talking to her, or rather, she gives him no opportunity of doing so, for in another moment she jumps up and prepares to leave the room.

'Now make haste and finish your breakfast,' she says; 'and get into your great-

coat again, for I shan't be more than five minutes dressing, and we must go to her at once.'

'*We?*—*we?*' stammers Mr. Bond; 'but I must really ask you to excuse me. My business——'

'I shan't excuse you! You must come with me! Who knows what use your legal knowledge may be to the poor girl in this extremity? I don't know how she may be situated. That man is not likely to have made a will, and his relations may come and swoop down upon all her little possessions. Your English law has such a precious lot of twisting and turning and lying about it, that one never knows where one may find one's self.'

'But just at present—when the husband has not been dead many hours—surely my presence——' commences the solicitor again.

‘If he had only been dead a minute you’d come all the same,’ replies his tormentor. ‘Delia Moray says she wishes me to go to her, and *I* wish that you accompany me. So say no more about it;’ upon which Mr. Bond wisely refrains from further discussion, and by the time Mrs. Hephzibah returns to the sitting-room he is ready to escort her to the City.

When they reach the Morays’ lodgings, Mrs. Timson, with the elongated face which she considers suitable to the occasion, precedes them upstairs with an intimation of their arrival, and Delia, very pale and very grave, comes out to meet her friend upon the landing.


‘It is so good of you to come to me,’ she says, as Mrs. Hephzibah embraces her, ‘but I felt sure you would. I sent a telegram to tell Mr. William Moray this evening, and he has already arrived here; and—and—we

don't get on very well together,' she concludes, with a look that says more than her words.

'Well! I'm all the more glad that I was able to come, my dear, then, and to bring my friend Mr. Bond, whom let me introduce to you. Mr. Bond is my legal adviser—you have heard me mention his name before, I think; and I have told him all your history, so you needn't mind what you say before him.'

'Pray come in from this cold landing,' says Delia simply, as, having bowed to the solicitor, she leads the way to the sitting-room.

The blinds are down, but there is a good fire in the grate, and it does not look more dismal than usual. The child is seated on the hearthrug playing with some books and toys, and William Moray, from his chair at the table, is watching him greedily as though



he considers him to be already his own. He does not look particularly gratified when his sister-in-law re-enters the room, followed by the strangers.

‘Some friends of mine who have been kind enough to call and see me,’ is all that Delia says in explanation, and then chairs are offered and accepted, and the party sit down together and feel uncomfortable, and don’t know how to begin the conversation.

‘This is a very melancholy occurrence, sir,’ says William Moray to Mr. Bond.

‘Very melancholy!’ is the rejoinder.

‘But only what was to be expected,’ chimes in Mrs. Horton decidedly; ‘and any one who knew of the deceased’s habits must be surprised to think he lasted so long. You’ll excuse my speaking of it in your presence, Mr. Moray, but I am a friend of Delia Moray, and I’ve come here this morning expressly to talk with her about

her future prospects. We all know the kind of life she led with your brother, so perhaps you will pardon us if we should be compelled to say anything to give you pain.'

'Perhaps you will prefer my going into the next room,' says William Moray.

'On the contrary, I prefer your remaining here,' replies Mrs. Horton; and being very curious to learn what she and Delia can possibly have to say to each other, he accepts the offer. 'Only I am going to speak without reserve,' adds the lady, for his especial benefit. 'And now, Delia Moray,' she says, laying her hand affectionately on that of the girl, 'what do you intend to do? Tell me everything. You can hardly remain here.'

'O yes, I can—for a few days at least,' replies Delia, with a slight shudder. 'Afterwards I think I shall take Willie back to

Holloway. The rooms suited me, and it is a healthy place for him.'

At these words Mrs. Hephzibah Horton sees William Moray shift in his chair and smile. She is sure that he means mischief or annoyance of some sort, and is determined to offer her protection to both mother and child.

'And what about the "Corinthian," my dear? Will they spare you till the funeral is over?'

'I hope so. I have sent a letter round to the manager to ask if he can fill my place for a week. If not, I suppose I must go on as usual. It seems very dreadful, but it is one of the penalties of the profession.'

'Women have had to do it in worse cases than yours, I expect; where their feelings have been concerned as well as their ideas of propriety. And who is to manage the business of the funeral for you?'

‘I don’t know—I am not sure,’ replies Delia uncertainly.

‘I take that responsibility upon my own shoulders,’ says William Moray.

‘I’m glad to hear it; not but what it’s only your duty. This girl has kept your brother alive quite long enough, in my opinion. It would be rather hard if she had to bury him as well.’

‘My family, madam, is above leaving the funeral obsequies of any of its members to be performed either inefficiently or through the charity of strangers,’ he answers grandly.

‘O! indeed, sir! Well, I repeat I’m glad to hear it. Your family has not been above leaving one of its members to be solely supported by the labour of a woman; but as they are going to bury him, least said soonest mended. And about your mourning, Delia: all mourning is humbug, but I suppose you

and the boy must wear it. How are you going to get it? Have you any money?

‘O! Mrs. Horton——’

‘Don’t “*O! Mrs. Horton!*” me, child, but answer my question. I come here as a friend, remember, so just write down what you want, and I’ll order it for you. I’m not much of a hand at shopping at the best of times. I dare say Mr. Bond here knows as much about dresses as I do, but I shall find plenty of people in London to help me. And for your present expenses, will ten pounds do? There are always lots of little extras to be paid for at a time like this.’

‘How shall I ever repay you?’ says Delia, as Mrs. Hephzibah puts the money into her hands. ‘It is too much. Indeed it is!’

‘You’ll have the less to repay, then,’ replies her friend bluntly, ‘but we’ll talk of all

that by-and-by. Has your husband left a will ?

‘ O, no ! He had nothing to leave,’ replies Delia innocently.

‘ An omission nevertheless,’ puts in the solicitor for the first time, ‘ and a very reprehensible one. Every man should make his will, if it be only to express his wishes on behalf of those he leaves behind him.’

‘ Then I am happy to be able to inform you that my late brother is exempt from your animadversions, sir,’ says William Moray, smiling ; ‘ for he *has* left a will which was duly signed and witnessed in my presence.’

‘ Glad to hear it,’ says the lawyer. ‘ Puts everything straight and comfortable.’

‘ A will !’ cries Delia, ‘ I never saw it ! Do you know where it is, Mr. Moray ?’

‘It is in my possession, and you will hear all about it in good time.’

‘I do not suppose it will contain any great surprises for you, Delia,’ says Mrs. Hephzibah, ‘but since you have all had your say, listen to mine. If I understand Mr. William Moray rightly, he charges himself with the responsibility and expenses of the funeral, and there is consequently nothing left for you to do here, where I know you must be very uncomfortable. So bring the child and come home with me. I can get a bedroom at the top of my house, where you shall be as snug as my old landlady can make you ; and as soon as everything is over, you can go back to your lodgings at Holloway, or decide on any other plan that seems best. But come home with me now.’

‘O ! you are so good—so very good to me !’ exclaims Delia, as she throws herself into Mrs. Hephzibah’s arms.

‘Do you accept my invitation, then?’

‘Gladly—thankfully. I shall only be *too* grateful to get away from this dreadful place,’ she whispers. ‘O, Mrs. Horton! you don’t know *half* of what I have suffered here.’

‘I can guess it, my poor child. So that is settled, and you return with me. If you have any little matters to arrange first, do them at once, for my time is precious, and so is that of Mr. Bond.’

Delia rises, and is about to quit the room. William Moray stops her.

‘Excuse me, but do I understand that you intend to take Willie with you to this lady’s house?’

‘Of course. Do you suppose I would go and leave the child here?’

‘Then I am afraid I must put a veto upon your doing so. I object to Willie’s going anywhere except to Brixton.’

‘*You object!*’ exclaims Delia. ‘What right have you to object to anything I may choose to do with him? *You* are not his father.’

‘No, but I am his guardian.’

‘Who made you so?’

‘My brother. By the will I just now told you was in my possession. I am left sole guardian to his son, and I refuse to allow him to be taken from this house until I do so myself.’

Delia becomes alarmed. The look of gravity upon the faces of her friends as they listen to her brother-in-law’s assertion, rouses her to a sense of danger.

‘Where is this will?’ she demands in a low voice, as she presses one hand upon her heart.

‘It is here,’ replies Mr. Moray, producing it from his pocket-book. ‘Perhaps, sir,’ he continues, turning to the solicitor, ‘since I

understand you are a lawyer, and it is so very hard to make ladies view these matters in a reasonable light, you will be kind enough to examine this document and convince yourself and them that it is legally executed, and binding in its effects.'

As he speaks, he hands Mr. Bond the paper which James Moray signed the night before, and the solicitor reads it in silence. When he has concluded, he looks at Mrs. Horton as much as to say, 'The game is up.'

Delia catches the look, and rightly interprets it.

'What is in that paper?' she demands, panting with excitement. 'Tell me — in Heaven's name — I have a right to know!'

'Now, my dear lady——' commences the solicitor.

'Be calm, Delia Moray,' interposes Mrs.

Hephzibah, 'and depend on it we will see all your legal rights secured to you.'

William Moray smiles furtively, and says nothing.

'How *can* I be calm,' gasps the unfortunate Delia, 'when I feel some further calamity is hanging over me? Ah, God! have I not suffered enough—enough already——' Her head droops on her breast for one moment, only to be raised the next with renewed energy. 'Let me know everything,' she says to the solicitor—'*everything*! I am ready to hear it.'

'Knowing nothing of the parties concerned, except through my friend Mrs. Horton, I'm not perhaps in a fit position to pass a decided opinion on this document; but as far as I can judge, it appears to me to be a very ill-advised and unnecessary proviso, and if the parties who——'

‘O ! tell me what it contains, for mercy’s sake !’ implores the mother.

‘Who wants your opinion about it ?’ says Mrs. Hephzibah sharply ; ‘give us the gist of the matter.’

‘Well, ladies, the gist of the matter is, that this paper, signed by the deceased, and witnessed by his brother and one Theresa Timson, deposes the sole guardianship of his son, William Angus Moray, to his brother, William Moray, and that without any reference to or interference on the part of Delia Moray, his wife. Which means, ladies, that that gentleman standing there has alone the power to decide where and how the boy shall be boarded and educated henceforward, and that his mother has no power whatever to gainsay or prevent him.’

‘Infamous !’ exclaims Mrs. Hephzibah energetically. ‘But if the law can right her, it shall.’

‘The law is futile to interfere,’ responds Mr. Bond. ‘This is the law.’

‘Bah!’ cries Mrs. Hephzibah, right in his face, to prevent the tears that have sprung to her eyes rolling down her cheeks.

But Delia’s scared gaze is fixed upon him.

‘*What* did you say?’ she inquires softly; ‘I don’t think I quite understand it. My boy is left to his uncle. To be educated, and fed, and kept by his uncle. Not to live with *me*, do you mean? *Could* he do it? Is that the law?’

‘It is the law, unfortunately, my dear madam,’ replies Mr. Bond, blowing his nose. ‘A father has absolute power over the destination of his child after seven years old. And the mother cannot interfere, which sometimes causes family differences to assume a very unhappy aspect.’

Still Delia does not seem rightly to com-

prehend the position in which her husband's will has placed her.

‘But Willie will remain with *me*,’ she says, appealing to her brother-in-law; ‘even if you have the direction of his education, or the choice of where he shall live, you cannot take my own child from me! Willie will always live under my roof—will he not? and I shall have the care of him as I have had until now.’

‘I am afraid not,’ answers William Moray, shaking his head. ‘My brother spoke very freely to me on this subject, and his express wishes were that in the event of his own death, Willie should reside with me at Brixton, and see as little of you as possible. It is my intention, therefore, to remove him there at once, and if you decide to visit your friend, I see no reason why he should not return with me to-day.’

She understands now. Her eyes flash, and

she looks as if she had just been roughly awakened from a dream.

‘It is not true—tell me it is not true,’ she cries, shaking Mr. Bond by the arm.

‘My dear lady! I cannot deceive you. It is true.’

‘You mean he can take my boy from me! my child, whom I brought into the world and have worked for ever since; and that that man, who lies dead in the next room, has, by a turn of his finger, cursed my whole life!’

‘Indeed, I am afraid that is the case.’

‘He shall not—he *shall* not! I defy him! Is it for this I have borne insult and violence and abuse, in bitter silence? Is it for this that my husband’s last act was to attempt my life? O! you cannot—cannot have the heart to take my boy from me?’ she cries, turning to her brother-in-law. ‘You *know* how I laboured and toiled to support that

dead man, and how he requited me. You will not tear from me the only comfort my sad life has known? You will be merciful, and spare my boy?

She has clasped her hands and sunk upon her knees before him, and her eyes streaming with tears are lifted to his face; but he turns away unheeding.

‘This is really a most unpleasant scene for all of us,’ he remarks to the solicitor and Mrs. Horton, ‘and I regret you should have been subjected to it. Pray, make Mrs. Moray understand, sir, that whatever my personal feelings might be on the subject, I could not consider myself justified in going against the last wishes of my departed brother, and that the sooner she reconciles herself to the idea the better.’

The way in which she [reconciles herself to it is by giving a deep groan and sinking

down upon the floor where she was kneeling.

‘ If you could persuade your friend——’ says William Moray to Mrs. Horton.

‘ Don’t speak to me !’ she answers abruptly. ‘ I think the whole transaction infamous, and worthy of your brother and yourself from beginning to end. He made her miserable whilst he lived, like the pitiful coward that he was, and he couldn’t even leave her in peace after he was dead. And you helped him, living, as you will help him now. But there will rest a curse upon you as there did upon him. Such things don’t go unpunished. They may be according to the law of England, but they’re not according to the law of God ; and He’ll visit them upon you as He has done upon him. And if the poor girl had never been such a fool as to marry him, he couldn’t have made her suffer like this to gratify his own petty revenge !’

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The woman on the floor seems to have been listening to Mrs. Hephzibah's words, for as the last sentence leaves her lips she raises her head, and a look of fierce determination succeeds the despair in her face.

What is it she gropes for in her bosom ? Does she mean to murder the man who threatens to rob her of her child ; and is it a concealed knife for which she seeks ? It might be, judging from the look upon her face. But whatever it is, as she gets hold of it she rises to her feet suddenly, and stands upon the hearthrug with her back to the fire.'

'Mr. Bond !' she exclaims, 'is that the truth ? Were my boy a bastard, could they take him from me ?'

'A strange question, my dear madam ; but certainly not—certainly not !'

'Not by will—or otherwise ?'

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‘By no means whatever ! It is only over his legitimate child that a man has any power.’

Something held in the hands behind her back drops into the blazing fire, and is shrivelled into nothing.

As Delia gives a rapid glance round, and sees it has entirely disappeared, a beautiful courage—the courage of despair—gleams from her eyes like that which must have inspired the martyrs of old when they placed their naked feet upon the burning ploughshares.

She catches up the child upon the hearth-rug, and holding him tightly to her breast, advances to the table.

‘Then I defy William Moray, or any other man to take my boy from me,’ she says. ‘He is mine, and I am his. We belong to one another only. *I was never married to his father !*’

At this announcement every one in the room is visibly startled.

‘Are you in earnest, madam?’ demands the solicitor incredulously.

‘Delia Moray! for God’s sake, think what you are sacrificing,’ whispers Mrs. Horton.

But the animal instinct is roused in the woman’s breast, and she shakes off her best friend with fierce impatience.

‘Leave me alone!’ she answers loudly. ‘I tell you ’tis the truth!’

‘It is not,’ says William Moray; ‘it is a trumped-up lie to serve your own purpose. I had the assurance from my brother’s lips that you were his wife!’

‘Where are the proofs, then? Bring them forward!’

‘You must have a copy of the marriage-certificate, surely?’ says the lawyer.

Mrs. Hephzibah Horton *remembers*—and says nothing.

‘I have no certificate,’ replies Delia.

‘That is of little consequence,’ says William Moray angrily. ‘A copy is easily procurable from the registrar’s books of the church where they were married. I am not going to be fooled in this way.’

‘But if we were never married in any church — what then?’ says Delia defiantly.

‘But I say you *were*! You were married at Chilton, in Berwick. Now! are you convinced that it is useless to try and deceive me?’

She laughs scornfully.

‘Go to Chilton, then, and get the certificate. There is no church there. It was burnt to the ground at the very time I stayed in the place with your brother.’

Mr. Moray starts. He has heard something of the occurrence before, and remem-

bers it is true. He begins to fear she may outwit him.

‘This is child’s play!’ he exclaims passionately. ‘There *must* be a copy of the certificate somewhere amongst my late brother’s papers. I shall go and search for it.’

He leaves the room as he speaks, and Mrs. Horton approaches Delia.

The mother’s face is very pale, and her lips are tightly compressed together, and as her friend grasps her hand she shrinks away from her.

‘Don’t touch me, or speak to me! Remember *what I am!*’

‘I do remember it, Delia Moray, and I admire your courage. But you cannot deceive me!’

The girl’s eyes turn towards her with a look of infinite gratitude.

‘Don’t mention it now ! For the next few minutes I must act or fail.’

William Moray re-enters the apartment.

‘Have you been successful, sir ?’ asks Mr. Bond.

‘D—n it ! no !’ is the reply. ‘But I will prove the truth of the marriage yet, if trouble or expense will do it.’

‘Meanwhile,’ interposes Mrs. Horton blandly, ‘you will have no objection, I suppose, to this lady returning home with me ?’

‘She may go to the devil !’ he answers fiercely.

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So she passes from the home where she has been so miserable, with a blight upon her fair fame, and a brand for ever on her

outcast child, believing that the joy she has so rashly purchased must outweigh the sufferings that accompany it.

And this is Delia Moray's *Lie* !

END OF VOL. I.



